Life along the Silk Road

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SECOND EDITION

Susan Whitfield

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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To the memory of Sir Aurel Stein, for his excavations along the Silk Road, and to Professor Edward Schafer, for his equally rigorous literary excavations. This book owes a great debt to the treasures discovered by each man.

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

My original intention in writing this book was to exploit the manuscripts and other sources—textual and material—discovered at Dunhuang and other sites in Chinese Central Asia to attempt to provide an accessible and reliable introduction to the complex history of this region in a wider—Silk Road—context. The original book was published under a U.K. trade imprint, John Murray, and therefore was not in a format that allowed notes. I am pleased now to have the opportunity to include them. Where possible, I have included references to primary sources—textual, visual, and material—and also to translations of the textual sources. This accords with my attempts to make the study of the Silk Road accessible to more people. For this reason I have also added links to online versions of translations and articles where available and to illustrations of the manuscripts and artifacts excavated from the Silk Road sites. Many of them are also freely available online through the International Dunhuang Project (IDP; online at http://idp.bl.uk).

Following the publication of the first edition, I started work on an exhibition at the British Library using much of the

research and showing many of the objects used for the book (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004). I followed this with another exhibition in Brussels showing new finds from the Silk Road in China (Whitfield 2010), and both projects expanded my understanding of the material culture of the first millennium AD. In additions to new excavations and finds, new textual sources have emerged, and I have therefore been able to supplement the text and revise some of my interpretations. I am also delighted that many more secondary historical sources now exist to help students, and I have cited these where relevant and hence reduced some of the historical background that I felt was necessary in the first edition. However, this field is still comparatively sparse. For example, there is as yet no historical monograph in English on any of the Tarim kingdoms, though there are now sufficient sources to write one.

Thanks to the new finds and publications and the research of other scholars, my own knowledge has increased, though I am always aware of how many yawning chasms remain. I have also traveled more widely in this area, visiting many more of the major and remote archaeological sites in the Taklamakan desert and other sites in Central Asia. I have retraced the steps of the Chinese and Tibetan solders fighting from the Amu Darya, now in Afghanistan, to the ancient kingdom in the Yasin valley, now in Pakistan, told in “The Soldier’s Tale,” and some of the route over the Lowari pass into the Chitral region, told in “The Pilgrim’s Tale.” This has given me a more acute awareness of the challenges of travel in this region and a great respect for these early travelers of the Silk Road.

In the first edition, I limited the geographical region to eastern Central Asia into China, including the Mongolian steppes and Tibetan plateau. I also concentrated on the Tarim basin and Dunhuang because of my knowledge of and access to the wealth of primary and material sources for that

region. I decided not to set a story in the ancient kingdom of of Turfan, despite the rich sources, as everyday life there had been covered well in English by others, notably Valerie Hansen (1995, 2013). I also limited the timescale to the last quarter of the first millennium AD. This was partially dictated by the primary sources and by my own knowledge, but it also allowed the chapters to overlap and offer the same events from different perspectives in order to deepen understanding of this complex period and the many peoples and cultures that populated it. The book was intended to be a slice of Silk Road history, to give the reader a taste for the whole and thus a hunger to discover more. The original story took place as the Silk Road was changing: the decline of cultures such as the Sogdians, who had played a key role in early trade, the rise of new powers on the steppes, and the introduction of Islam and the subsequent decline of Buddhism and the other religions of the area.

For this revised edition, I added a chapter (within the original timescale but extended geographically) and a prologue (set some two centuries previously). These new chapters are intended to incorporate the steppe and sea routes and to bring Africa and Europe into the story while retaining the core focus on Central Asia and the Tarim. I decided not to extend the timescale beyond the tenth century despite the temptation of a number of rich primary sources. There are now excellent studies on the Chinese maritime routes and Indian Ocean trade of this period and later, during the Mongol period, with the unification of much of Eurasia under a single power. A brief survey with references is given in the epilogue for those who wish to explore further.

My new prologue, “The Shipmaster’s Tale,” takes us to the early sixth century and introduces two aspects of the Silk Road that have often been neglected (though this is changing): the involvement of African merchants, and the interdependence of the land and maritime routes. It also

introduces Christianity and Judaism. Although I have had an interest in the Axumite kingdom for many years and have visited several of the sites, it is not my area of specialism, and I have thus relied more heavily here on secondary sources and the comments of kind colleagues—but, of course, any errors and omissions are my own. In addition, only limited information is available on maritime travel, and I have therefore not been able to add many details to that section. Fortunately, the field of maritime archaeology is developing and bringing up many more finds from the seabed, so it is expected we might learn much more over the coming years.

The additional chapter, “The Writer’s Tale,” is set in the early tenth century and takes us to the city of Isfahan in Persia, then nominally part of the Arab caliphate. It is intended to give the reader a broader picture of the Iranian-Arab-China intersection and decline in Central Asia. From there, we travel with the writer and his sources to the steppe kingdoms of the Khazars and Bulgars on routes following the Volga river and thence to the shores of the eastern Baltic and the fringes of Europe. Several modern authors have already mined these rich sources for both historical and fictional works, and I am indebted to them. However, few sources link these routes with the existing trade networks discussed elsewhere in this book, hence my decision to include this chapter.

I have also slightly revised the order so that the first half of the book presents the wider context and the four chapters based primarily on Dunhuang sources come at the end.

Since I wrote the first edition of this book, when the term “the Silk Road” was becoming more popular in Europe, there has been a growing debate on the meaning and usefulness of the term—even as it is exploited ubiquitously as a marketing tool. I discuss this briefly in the rewritten introduction.

Working again on this book made me realize that, though I

have learned much since I first researched and wrote it in 1997-98, what I have learned above all else is the state of my ignorance. All I can hope to offer here is a snapshot that shows something of the interconnectedness of Afro-Eurasia in the first millennium AD. But any snapshot, whatever the care taken in its craft, is a product of a moment in time and space and the choices of its creator. This book inevitably captures the state and viewpoint of my own scholarship, molded by that of my background, culture, and time. I hope that the picture presented here will be intriguing enough to lead the reader to want to learn more about this fascinating historical period.

Mistakes crept into the first edition owing to haste and my own ignorance. I have corrected these where I noticed them. My thanks to the many colleagues who have read the revised chapters and suggested further corrections. Any mistakes that remain or that have been introduced are entirely my own. Lack of time and lack of knowledge remain constants in my life, and this book is necessarily a work in progress.

There are too many people who have helped in my research and work on IDP over the past twenty years to thank individually here, but I appreciate all your support and generosity in sharing your knowledge so freely. I must give special thanks to the IDP team and other colleagues at the British Library, notably John Falconer, Vic Swift, and Sam van Schaik, who with their patience, support, and friendship have made it possible for me to fit research and writing into an extremely busy schedule, and who have provided sanity and refuge during difficult times.

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION AND NAMES

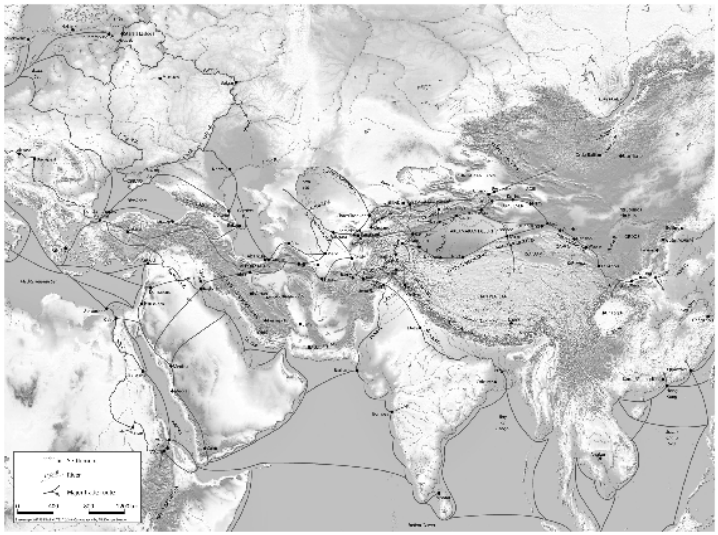
Many of the names in the text are in languages written in non-Roman scripts, and these have been romanized throughout. For Chinese, Sanskrit, and Tibetan, I have used widely accepted systems in all cases except where a different transliteration is in common usage: for Chinese, the pinyin system; Sanskrit, IAST/ISO 15919 convention; and Tibetan, the Wylie system. There is no standard transliteration for Turkic, and I have followed the advice of colleagues as to accepted current practice—for example, using “k” and not “q” ("Kocho” rather than “Qocho") and “k” instead of “kh” in most cases, but continuing to use other romanizations when there is a common usage. For Ge’ez, I have followed most contemporary scholars. For Arabic and Persian, I have followed the Library of Congress conventions. I am not a linguist of these languages and so have relied on secondary sources and colleagues to check. I apologize for any inadvertent mistakes.

Consistency is not possible with the names of towns and regions. I use contemporary names where possible or meaningful, but in some cases strict historical accuracy has

been sacrificed to clarity, and the names used are necessarily anachronistic. In many cases, towns have different names depending on the source. For example, Beshbalik, the Turkic name of a town as found in Uygur sources, is called Beiting in Chinese sources (and it has yet another name in Tibetan sources). In such cases, I have generally used the name given by the people dominant in the town at that period (at the time of "The Horseman's Tale," for example, the town was ruled by the Turkic Uygurs and so is given as Beshbalik). Since this book spans a long period of time, with many changes of regimes, there are inevitably inconsistencies.

The names of all the characters are found in contemporary sources, and I have referenced these in the endnotes. We have sufficient information about some of these people and the events of their lives to form the basis of the tale—such as that of the widow Ah-long or the offical Zhai Fengda. In these cases, I have amplified the recorded events of their lives with details culled from contemporary sources. So, for example, we know that Ah-long was in a land dispute, and all the details of this can be found in extant legal documents. But we have no record of her everyday life—of the clothes she wore, her friends, interests, or beliefs. However, such details can be extrapolated from the many contemporary sources—textual, visual, and material—for the clothes and pastimes of women of her class at the time. We have records showing women gambling, of women seeking help for illness, and of meeting with other women at the clubs associated with local temples. I have used these to create a composite character. The distinction between first-hand and added material is made clear in the notes. In other cases, such as the horseman or the soldier, no relevant historical accounts have survived, if they existed at all, and so I have had to create the character. But all the factual details are taken from contemporary sources. The fiction lies in putting these together to form composites and in giving them motives and

feelings.



Some of the major Silk Road trade routes by land and sea in the first millennium AD. (Martin Lubikowski, ML Design, London.)

Introduction

COINED IN 1877 by Baron Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905), a German geographer with commercial interests in a proposed railway to connect Europe and China across Eurasia, the term “Silk Road” is now commonly encountered both inside and outside academia.[1] Indeed, it can be said to have become a brand, used to label anything exotic and randomly eastern to the whole of pre-modern exchanges across Eurasia. Its use for a website trading clandestinely in banned products is perhaps one of the more intelligent appropriations of the term in recent years.[2]

Yet the Silk Road is a term that was little used twenty years ago when I started work on the first edition of this book.[3] Like many abbreviations, it is not strictly descriptive—as James Millward points out, “neither silk nor a road.”[4] (I would be inclined to rephrase this as “not only silk and not only a road.”)[5] Nor should it be interpreted as restricting the discussion to the relations between two points, China and Rome, East and West, though it is often popularly presented in this dichotomous or binary way.[6] Lands in between are just as much part of the story (Central Asia; south, southeast,

and west Asia; the Near East; Arabia) as are other places on the edges of Afro-Eurasia (northern Europe; southern Arabia; eastern and northern Africa).[7] As Tamara Chin shows, von Richthofen was always interested in the history and mapping of these trans-Eurasian interconnections.[8]

Some scholars have argued recently for a complete rejection of the term because of these simplifications and its widespread popular adoption.[9] However, we should consider its usefulness before rejecting it—and recognize that, as academics, we have little hope of influencing its wider use.[10]

In the Buddhist notion of *upāya*—expedient means—it is important to draw people into a subject, even if this sometimes means giving a simplified and inevitably misleading account, rather than to risk alienating them with too much detail too soon.[11] In this sense, the popularization of the term "Silk Road" can be seen as an opportunity rather than an impediment.

Of course, scholars already use many terms in offering convenient and broadly descriptive categories while recognizing and debating their limitations. Periodizations such as "Medieval" or "the Middle Ages" remain widely accepted in scholarship and teaching as well as being used in popular culture.[12] The process of debating the scope and relevance of those terms can only help in our understanding and the furthering of scholarship.[13] The use of "Silk Road" as a historical category is still relatively new, and we should expect some discussion and disagreement about its scope and applicability; this is inevitable but also positive, as it potentially leads to a more nuanced definition and broader consensus.[14] The work by Tim Williams on mapping the Silk Road to support the bid by China and Central Asian countries to include it as a cultural route on the UNESCO World Heritage list is an excellent example of this. It has led to greater clarity about long-accepted routes and revealed other, potentially important routes not previously mapped or

fully investigated.[15]

Is there a consensus among scholars on what makes "the Silk Road" a meaningful term, without it merely becoming World History without the Americas? Silk was, of course, not the only commodity traded across Eurasia, and we do not yet know whether it was even the most important in terms of volume, value, or profit for all or some of pre–modern Eurasian contact.[16] Silk had been produced in large quantities in China for over three thousand years, but it was only at the end of the first millennium BC that knowledge of and desire for cultivated silk throughout Afro-Eurasia prompted the start of its sustained movement as a trading commodity. The knowledge of silk accompanied the start of the move westward of the Chinese empire in the second century BC and the rise of the Kushan empire in the first century AD. Yarn, finished weaves, and technologies of sericulture and weaving were all catalysts for long-distance trade and remained so for over a thousand years. It was not by accident or whim that von Richthofen chose silk as the characteristic merchandise encapsulating cross-Eurasian trade. The movement in silk beyond China therefore also sets our starting point for "the Silk Road" from the second/first century BC.[17] Of course, there was long-distance Eurasian trade for millennia before this, such as in lapis and jade, from Central Asia westward and Central Asia eastward, respectively, but the political changes and desire for silk led to more sustained movement *across* Central Asia, by land and sea, both east-west and north-south.[18]

The movement and exchange of silk across Central Asia—and all the other goods that this trade enabled and with which it coexisted—along with the corresponding movement and exchange of all the other tangible and intangible cultural baggage that travels with people (religions, technologies, medicine, fashions, food) is characteristic of what we mean

by “the Silk Road.” We can accept that not all silk in all periods and places would have to be exchanged through trade, but trade is an essential part of the story.19

The movement and exchange of silk and the other commodities took place in stages: rarely did the people carrying the goods travel very long distances by land, and certainly not from Rome to China or from northern Europe to Sri Lanka.20 The sea trade also went in stages, though these were often longer—from East Africa to Sri Lanka, for example.21 Nor was there a single road or route.22 Numerous existing trading routes were used and some new ones created. Oft en these routes were already in use for other commodities, such as ivory, salt, jade, tea, musk, and horses.23 But the persistence of such a simplification—a single route along which merchants traveled long distances carrying silk—is indicative of the desire to frame “the Silk Road” as a dichotomous or binary concept (East to West, China to Rome) and to ignore the lands in between. This is potentially misleading and more difficult to transcend: dichotomies are always seductive.24

This is not new. Although the role of Central Asia in world history has been the subject of sustained scholarly debate over the past two centuries, it remains secondary to the histories of the empires on its periphery.25 Central Asia has often been defined negatively as the place outside the boundaries of its neighboring civilizations.26 But if we know the region largely through the annals of its neighbors and the accounts of those who passed through, it is nevertheless misleading to assume that it has always been a place of transience: a land of nomads with neither civilization nor culture, lacking established cities or a history of its own. Evidence uncovered over the past century has revealed a quite different story. This evidence and the increasing use of “the Silk Road” in scholarship should be seen as an opportunity for scholars to readdress their assumptions and

to focus more attention on this important region.

An unfortunate division has grown up in the past few decades between studies of land and of sea routes. Early discussions of the Eurasian silk trade made no such distinction, looking at the use of both sea and land routes depending on economic and other factors.27 But with the development of studies of Indian Ocean networks and southeast maritime trade, and with maritime archaeology uncovering new sources, this issue is being redressed.28 The work on the Indian Ocean networks has also brought Africa back into the story. Merchant ships from North and East Africa—Egypt and Axum—set sail from the Red Sea for ports in Yemen, to the Gulf, along the Persian coast, and to India and Sri Lanka, where they moored alongside ships from southeast Asia and China.29 These are also part of the Silk Road story.

Central Asia remains at the heart of the Silk Road, and of this book. The strategic importance of Central Asia was never doubted by those neighboring powers who fought for its control. During the first millennium AD, many of the world's empires—Indian, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Turkic, and Tibetan—controlled this region, and it is the story of Central Asia seen through their eyes that this book tells. But much of the evidence for this story was not revealed until the nineteenth century, when two quite different empires—those of Russia and Britain—played out their rivalries in the deserts and mountains of the region. Military and political missions were dispatched to Central Asia, and archaeologists followed in their wake, drawn by tales of treasures uncovered from lost cities in the sand. Whatever we may now think about the rights or wrongs of these colonial incursions, their work has enabled this story to be told, and their finds have inspired—and continue to inspire—scholars to attempt to understand the history of Central Asia and the Silk Road.30

Even if we accept the existence of a “Silk Road,” it is a topic too elusive and complex to enable a comprehensive history.[31] I therefore deliberately chose in this book to concentrate on a relatively small slice, both of geography and of time, to show the richness of the interconnections and, most specifically, their influence on certain cultures and individual lives.

The main geographical focus of this book is the area that M. Aurel Stein, perhaps the most famous early-twentieth-century archaeologist to explore this region, borrowing a term already coined by the French, called Sérinde/Serindia: its “geographical limits . . . comprise practically the whole of that vast drainageless belt between the Pamir in the west and the Pacific watershed in the east, which for close on a thousand years formed the special meeting ground of Chinese civilization, introduced by trade and political penetration, and of Indian culture, propagated by Buddhism.”[32]

For convenience, I use the term “Tarim” throughout this work to cover the heart of Stein’s “Serindia,” and I include Dunhuang in this even though, geographically speaking, it lies just east of the Tarim basin.

Stein and other archaeologists from France, Germany, Russia, Sweden, Japan, and the United States excavated scores of sites dating from the first millennium AD. One of the richest sources of documents and paintings was a small cave in a Buddhist complex outside the town of Dunhuang, now in Gansu province, China. The cave contained over forty thousand manuscripts, early printed documents, and paintings dating from ca. 400 to 1000 AD. It had been sealed in the early eleventh century (we do not know why or by whom) but was discovered by accident in 1900.[33] When Stein arrived in 1907, having heard rumors of the find, the caretaker of the cave complex was happy to part with several cartloads of manuscripts for a small sum after some

negotiation. He had already given away some of the manuscripts and paintings to local officials and was trying to raise funds for the repair of the sculptures decorating the hundreds of other caves in the complex. Paul Pelliot, an accomplished French sinologist, arrived hard on Stein's heels and looked, he claimed, through all the remaining material before persuading the caretaker to part with several more cartloads. After this, the Chinese authorities ordered the removal of the cave's remaining Chinese contents to Beijing, though some mysteriously disappeared after being deposited at the Ministry of Education. (They later appeared in the collection of a Chinese bibliophile who worked in the ministry.)[34] Nevertheless, there were still manuscripts for sale when Japanese and Russian expeditions arrived at Dunhuang a few years later, and Stein bought a further 600 scrolls in a neighboring town in 1913. How many of these later acquisitions are forgeries is still being investigated.[35]

The importance of the Dunhuang documents cannot be overstated, and they form the core of this book, with the four final chapters concentrating on residents of the town: an official, a nun, a widow, and an artist. But the scale of the Dunhuang find has created its own issues. "Dunhuangology" has become a distinct field of study, with university departments, journals, conferences, and hundreds of scholars in China and Japan devoted to it. This sometimes obscures the wider context by approaching Dunhuang solely through Chinese historiography and neglecting its links with a larger world.[36] The wider "Silk Road" context is, I would argue, essential to the understanding of Dunhuang and the lives of its residents. This book therefore makes use of other sources —material and textual—from the Tarim and a broader region while also relying on secondary scholarship for the areas outside my own very limited expertise. Some of the tales deliberately move outside this core area—into Iran, China, Africa, and Europe—to remind the reader of the wider

context of the Silk Road.

The tales that follow the prologue start in AD 730 and continue to the last years of the tenth century, the end of the first millennium. This is not an arbitrary choice. As pointed out by Christopher Beckwith, “The middle of the eighth century . . . saw fundamental changes, usually signalled by successful political revolts, in every Eurasian empire. Most famous among them are the Carolingian, Abbasid, Uygur Turkic and anti-Tang [Chinese] rebellions, each of which is rightly considered to have been a major watershed in their respective national histories. Significantly, all seem to have been intimately connected with central Eurasia.”37 The rebellions, which all took place between 742 and 755, were followed by growth in both commerce and culture, providing the basis for the development of great cosmopolitan cities. It is the lives of people in this burgeoning period that I discuss in these tales—though, inevitably, they offer only a sample of the diversity of the Silk Road.

The Silk Road started long before this time and covered a wider area than these vignettes can hope to offer. My prologue introduces an Axumite shipmaster of the sixth century and describes maritime trade and the flourishing East African links with Eurasia to give a taste of this wider context.

Similarly, although Buddhism’s predominance in the Tarim during this period is reflected in the tales of Chudda (a monk from Kashmir), Miaofu (abbess of a nunnery), and Ah-long (a lay believer), other religions were carried by missionaries across Central Asia and found Silk Road converts: Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Christianity are all mentioned. “The Writer’s Tale” introduces some of this diversity, discussing the Jewish Khazars, the Islamic Bulgars, and the Christian and pagan Vikings.

By the sixth century, Jewish communities could be found in Iran, India, and Samarkand. In the eighth and ninth

centuries, Judaism spread further, gaining converts among the Turkic Khazars who lived north of the Caspian Sea, while Jewish Radhanite merchants entered the Tarim.38 Zoroastrianism was the religion of the Sasanians, and it too had gained converts in Samarkand by the sixth century, from whence it was carried into China by merchants and missionaries. Sasanian rulers sought refuge in Kucha when their empire was conquered by the Arab caliphate in the seventh century, and a Zoroastrian temple was built in Chang'an (Xian) around this time. We also have mention of a Zoroastrian community and temple in Dunhuang.39 Manichaeism found converts among the Sogdians and, through them, the Uygur rulers, while Christianity established bases along the Tarim and into China—it was introduced through sea routes in a later period.40 The Axumites in East Africa were also Christian, though of a different church.

Thus, by the time these tales begin in 730, communities of all these religions had been established in the great cities of Samarkand and Chang'an, and in the towns in between. Islam had also spread east, and older native religions still persisted: Bon among the Tibetan nobility; Tängrism among Turkic peoples; and Hinduism among groups resident to the northwest of India as far as Bactria. By the end of the tenth century, the major religions had experienced severe persecution, and the religious nature of Central Asia was changing.

The Silk Road did not end then. My epilogue briefly discusses the following centuries, with the expansion of the Mongol empire and the continued flourishing of both land and sea routes.

Although some of the characters in these tales do not travel the trade routes, all of them reveal in their everyday lives the effect of the long-distance exchanges enabled by the Silk Road, such as the Buddhism of the monk or nun, the

medicine used by the widow, the necklace chosen by the princess, the style of the painter, or the way the official sees the stars of the night sky. The tales offer a microcosm of the effects of these Afro-Eurasian trading networks to highlight the complexity and the reach of the Silk Road into all aspects of life.

PROLOGUE

The Shipmaster's Tale

TAZENA, 520–535

When the lady of Malik rides her camel at dawn,
her litter appears like a large ship in the midst
of the valley of Dad, one of the ships of Adulis
or of ibn-Yamin, which the mariner now turns
aside and now directs straight ahead, its prow
cuts through the foam of the water as a
gambler divides the dust with his hand.

TARAFAH, *Mu'allaqāt* 11, 3–5, sixth century[1]

IT WAS LATE SPRING, and Tazena was looking out to sea, immune to the bustle of the quay at Gabaza, the port at Adulis, to a ship just visible on the horizon.[2] The sea, for once, seemed calm, but Tazena knew too well the dangers of the treacherous currents that could pull ships onto the coral reefs lurking just below the surface. His countrymen still chose to bind the planks of their ships with cord rather than using nails, believing that it made them more pliable and able to withstand being dragged onto a reef.[3] He had seen many nailed ships break up in the sea. But he also understood those who preferred the nailed ship for negotiating the monsoon winds across the ocean beyond the Red Sea.[4]

His ships were preparing to head south from Adulis for Persian and Indian ports with cargoes of glass, ivory, frankincense, and emeralds. Sindh, with its port of Barbarikon on the Indus delta, had been a major entry point for goods from the west for several centuries.5 In the early centuries, the Kushan empire in northern Afghanistan had sought glass and other wares, carried by merchants up the Indus river valley to Shatial and then northwest along its tributaries to the Kushan capitals.6 Coins minted in Axum also found their way to the Central Asian kingdom.7 Musk, castor, spikenard, gems, and other goods came in the other direction from the land routes of Central Asia, many supplied by Kushan and Sogdian merchants. The Sogdians became dominant with the fall of the Kushan empire.8

Tazena had heard from Indian merchants of Shatial, a place where hundreds of visitors had inscribed their names in the rocks along the valley, including many in scripts unknown to the Indians.9 The Kushan empire had long since disappeared, but some locals told of the visit of a Kushan diplomatic mission to Axum centuries before, bringing a gift of over a hundred newly minted gold Kushan coins (see figures 1 and 2).10 The coins were stored in an Indian-made carved wooden casket with gold hinges and thin inlays of green stones, and they had been left at a sacred site on the road from Adulis to Axum. The Debra Damo Monastery had recently been built on the site, and the casket of coins remained there.11

FIGURE 1. Front (*on left*) and back (*on right*) of a coin of King Joel, Axum, showing a Christian cross on the back. (© The Trustees of the British Museum.)

Tazena had several ships, and most years he traveled with one or another of them. By the time he returned with the northwest monsoon winds, he had little time to make the eight- to ten-day journey southwest to Axum where his family lived. Like most of his countrymen, he was a Christian, and he would always stop at the church at Adulis to give thanks for his safe return and pray for his family.12

The fourth-century King Ezana had converted to Christianity following his encounter with Frumentius, a Syrian slave captured on the coast.13 The king decreed that the gold, silver, and copper coins minted in Axum should show a Christian cross on their obverse; the front continued to depict the king's head.14 Previous mintings had shown a disk and a crescent, representing the royal tutelary deity Mahrem; King Ezana had presented himself as Mahrem's son.15 By Tazena's time, numerous monasteries and fine churches existed throughout the country, showcasing the skills of local stonemasons, carpenters, and artists, including the cathedral at Axum and a large church at Adulis with its distinctive basilica and rich decorations.16

FIGURE 2. Kushan coin similar to one of those in the Axum hoard: gold double *stater* of Vima Kadphises. (© The Trustees of the British Museum.)

A decade previously, Tazena's ships had joined the military convoy sent by King Kaleb to the lands of Yemen across the Red Sea in southern Arabia, as there were reports that the Christian Axumite communities at Zafar and Najrān had been attacked by the Jewish Ḥimyarite king Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar.[17] Najrān was an important point on the frankincense trade routes, and the Axumites therefore had good economic reasons for wishing to retain their influence.[18] The mints at Axum had been busy producing gold coins to pay the armies.[19]

The Greek traveler and monk Cosmas Indicopleustes—so called because of his voyage to India—was visiting Adulis at the time and, at the request of King Kaleb and in preparation for this campaign, made a copy of a local inscription. It had been carved onto a throne in Greek and the Axumite language, Ge'ez, to commemorate the conquests of a previous Axumite king.[20] The inscription dated to a pre-Christian time and recorded the sacrifices to the pagan gods, included Ares, the God of War and counterpart of Mahrem:

> When I had reestablished peace in the world which is subject to me, I came to Adulis to sacrifice for the safety of those who navigate on the sea, to Zeus, Ares and Poseidon. After uniting and reassembling my armies I set up here this throne and consecrated it to Ares, in the

twenty-seventh year of my reign.[21]

The conversion to Christianity is shown by an inscription by King Ezana, the Greek version of which starts:

> In the faith of God and the power of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit who saved for me the kingdom, by the faith of his son Jesus Christ, who has helped me and will help me always.[22]

In the early centuries of Axum power, Ge'ez was written in a script that consisted solely of consonants. It came from southern Arabia across the Red Sea. But by the time of the conversion of King Ezana, the Axumites had developed a script with vowels, possibly influenced by Indian scripts.[23] In addition to inscriptions, it was used for the legend on gold and silver coins and for translations of the Bible and other Christian literature that followed the conversion.[24]

Churches and monasteries were established throughout the Axumite kingdom—some, such as that at Yeha, reusing ancient structures. Like much of the Axumite kingdom, Yeha was in the highlands. After leaving Adulis, the coastal plane soon gave way to barren, rocky mountains that grew progressively higher. These marked the edge of the Great Rift Valley and rose to almost 10,000 feet. The heat and humidity of the plains disappeared. Monasteries could be seen perched on their cliff s and outcrops, offering a peaceful and remote setting suitable for contemplation and prayer. They also offered a place of rest for the many travelers and merchants who, despite the difficult terrain, carried their goods to and from the port.

It was no different this year, as Tazena turned his attention back to the port and its bustle.[25] For weeks, parties of traders had been arriving with cargoes of ivory, rhinoceros horn, animals, hides, furs, frankincense, and slaves from beyond the Nile, emeralds from the mines at Beja, and gold

from Sasu.[26] In centuries before, the ships from Egypt had brought glasswares sought by the Axumite elite as well as by the Persian and Indian merchants.[27] Tazena had a set of Roman glass goblets in his family that they still used occasionally, but now the fashion was for metal tableware.[28]

Tazena knew of much of the world from his travels, and he was proud of Axum's place in it. Indeed, he had heard that the third-century Persian prophet Mani had listed Axum alongside Persia, Rome, and China as one of the four most important kingdoms in the world.[29] Tazena traded with both Romans and Persians, though his main ports of call were on the west coast of India.

Several years previously, he had taken onboard a group of merchants who had been directed by the king to try to corner the market in Chinese silk in Taprobane.[30] Ships from China brought their silk to its large port of Mantai.[31] The Byzantine emperor Justinian I (r. 527–65) wanted to try to undercut the Persian markup and suggested that the Axumites buy all the silk and sell it on to him at a more favorable price than offered by the Persians.[32] The delegation had not been successful: on arrival it was clear that the local traders, used to dealing with the Persians and turning a good profit, had no reason to change: "It was impossible for the Ethiopians to buy silk from the Indians, because the Persian merchants are present at the ports where the first ships of the Indians put in, since they inhabit a neighbouring country, [and] were always accustomed to buying the entire cargoes."[33]

Not all Chinese silk reached Persian merchants by sea: much traveled through the kingdoms of the Tarim and Central Asia to the borders of Persia. Cosmas Indicopleustes noted that it was far longer in distance to take the silk by sea and that most silk came by land.[34] However, the maritime and land routes linking African, Europe, and Asia were always in a symbiotic relationship. If the winds were

favorable, a ship could travel three times the speed of a camel caravan and carry the load of a thousand camels.[35] Moreover, by sea, “the incidental hazards of negotiation, protection money, wilful obstruction and downright violence were so much rarer than in the carrying of goods across region and region . . . by land.”[36] Yet many ships plied the coast, stopping frequently at ports, and thus were subject to duties. Also, ships with their entire cargo were regularly lost at sea.[37] Goods such as musk and ivory were sourced deep inland and had to travel a considerable distance by land.

Athough the sixth-century campaign to Mantai to buy silk directly and bypass the Persians was not successful, by this time cultivated silk was being produced in Central Asia, and within a few decades the story would spread of the Nestorian monks arriving at Justinian’s court with silkworm eggs hidden in their hollow bamboo staves.[38] Yarns and weaves from China continued to be popular, however, and the Sogdians, who in previous centuries had traveled to the Indian ports and were now trading across the Tarim into China, extended their business to Byzantium. They avoided the Persians by traveling the northern routes via the Caspian Sea and Caucasus.[39]

Tazena had encountered Chinese ships in Taprobane. They were very different from his own vessels: the planks were nailed together, and they used a square bow and several masts.[40] But he had not seen any in Adulis.[41] Like many of his countrymen, Tazena was literate, and he spoke a few of the languages of the traders, including some Persian and Indian dialects, but he knew no Chinese. However, he realized the importance of the Chinese for his trade. The Chinese valued the glassware that the Axumites obtained from Byzantine Rome, and they also filled their ships with ivory.[42] There were elephants in southwest China at the time, but the demand for ivory was higher than could be met locally. It was carved into chopsticks, hairpins, and combs for

the elite as well as used for the ceremonial tablets taken by officials to court and for decorations of the imperial carriage.43

Tazena was a curious man and, on one visit to Taprobane, intrigued by the excitement in the port of those he recognized as monks and nuns from both India and China, he learned of the great festival of the tooth of the Buddha held at the capital in the hills.44 The clergy were Buddhist. He knew of the religion from his many visits to Taprobane where there were tens of thousands of monks.45 He decided to join the celebrations. He had to wait several months before he could catch the monsoons and attempt the journey back across the seas, and the ceremony took place during this enforced stay.46 He learned that the tooth relic had been regularly worshipped since it had been brought to the island. A richly dressed man on a large elephant announced the ceremony—though for Tazena Indian elephants always seemed small when compared to those used to pull King Kaleb's state carriage.47

Over the ten days following the announcement, more and more people flocked to the capital, and the roads were decorated with flowers, incense, and statues of Buddha in his former lives. Finally, the day arrived when the tooth was brought out and paraded along the flower-strewn roads to the monastery. There it was placed in the main Buddha Hall. It was to remain there for ninety days while followers flocked to the many services, but Tazena left to return to the port and prepare his ships for their homeward voyage.

Since that experience in Taprobane, he had crossed the ocean almost every year and, despite losing several ships and cargoes captained by others, had remained safe and grown rich. But now he was growing older and wanted to spend more time at home. He hoped this would be his last voyage. His wish was to come true, but not in the way he imagined. On his next journey, the ship floundered in the ocean and,

despite his considerable skills, it could not be saved. He, his crew, and the valuable cargo disappeared below the unforgiving sea.

ONE

The Merchant's Tale

NANAIVANDAK, 730–751

The country of Samarkand is about 500 miles in circumference and broader from east to west than from north to south. The capital is six miles or so in circumference, completely enclosed by rugged land and very populous. The precious merchandise of many foreign countries is stored here. The soil is rich and productive and yields abundant harvests. The forest trees afford thick vegetation and flowers and fruit are plentiful. *Shen* horses are bred here. The inhabitants' skill in the arts and trades exceeds that of other countries. The climate is agreeable and temperate and the people brave and energetic.

XUANZANG, *Buddhist Records of the Western World,* AD 646[1]

IT WAS THE YEAR 751 by the western calendar, 134 by Islamic reckoning, the second year of the reign of al-Saffaḥ, the first of the Arabic Abbasid caliphs and the Byzantine Carolingian emperors, and the ninth in the *Tianbao* (Heavenly Riches) reign period of the Tang-dynasty emperor Xuanzong in China. The merchant Nanaivandak was from Samarkand, a city-state formerly independent but now, since the advance of the Arab-led armies east of the Amu Darya (Oxus river), under the rule

of the caliphate.2 He had traveled for nearly a year from Samarkand, over the towering Pamir mountains, and along the fringes of the Taklamakan desert to Chang'an, the capital of Tangdynasty China.3

Nanaivandak's family hailed from the town of Panjikant, about forty miles east of Samarkand in the region known as Sogdia.4 The Arab armies coming from the west referred to Sogdia as "the land beyond the Oxus," or Transoxania. Panjikant was at the easternmost edge, tucked in the Zerafshan valley between two fingers of mountains that extruded from the great Pamir ranges to the east. Panjikant was on a small hill and, like all Sogdian cities, was built with thick fortified walls. The land sloped away on the western side of the city to the Zerafshan river, and the snow-capped peaks of the Pamir dominated the southeastern horizon.

The area enclosed within the walls was quite small, little more than thirty acres, and only the ruler, nobles, merchants, and richer tradesmen had their houses there.5 By Nanaivandak's time, the merchants and landowners lived in large two-story houses, crowded together with vaulted alleys in between. A large double-height audience hall on the ground floor of each house was decorated with murals and woodcarvings and illuminated by a skylight. A staircase led to the living quarters on the second floor. The houses also had a room containing a Zoroastrian fire altar. Small workshops occupied the ground floor facing the main street, and these were rented out to shopkeepers and artisans. There was no space for courtyards, gardens, or parks, and few trees grew within the walls, though the valley floor was criss-crossed with irrigation canals that fed the fields and numerous gardens. The small lanes of the city were crowded and dirty with refuse, and the smell was sometimes unbearable in the summer when the temperature could soar to over 100° F and the air was still. After a few days, the heat of the unrelenting sun would even scorch the summer grass

on the plain, and everyone would long for a rare rainstorm to wash clean the city lanes.

The city did not stop at the walls. A bazaar was held outside the main gate leading west to Samarkand, and the area was always bustling with people and animals. Many languages might be heard at any time, haggling over the silks, spices, stones, and other luxuries that dazzled the senses with their colors and smells. Smaller houses sprawled down the hill and over the valley floor.

Nanaivandak wore distinctive Sogdian clothes: a Phrygian hat, conical with the top turned forward; a knee-length, belted over-jacket of deep-blue silk brocade woven with decorative roundels enclosing two deer facing each other, a Sasanian design (see figure 3); and narrow trousers tucked into calf-length brocade boots with leather soles.6 His dress and heavily bearded face distinguished him from the Chinese, Turks, and Tibetans in Chang'an's Western Market, but he was not the sole representative of his community in the Chinese capital. The Sogdians were the recognized traders of the eastern Silk Road, and Sogdian communities had existed in all its sizeable towns for several centuries.7

Nanaivandak profited handsomely from the sale of his cargo of musk, silver-ware, and gems in Chang'an, despite having had to pay a considerable bribe to customs officers at the Chinese frontier. Samarkand was a center for trading in gems—rubies, emeralds, and lapis—many of them mined in the mountains to the south, and he was an expert in these. He had traded some of the gems en route for sal ammoniac, manufactured from animal dung, and musk, from the glands of deer in Tibet, and both were in demand in China.8 He had not intended to carry the bulky silverware but heard from a countryman that there was demand for finely made wares by the Turkic-Sogdian general Rokshan, who was defending China's northeastern border, and so he added a few fine pieces, including a gilt silver ewer with a relief of a Bactrian

camel (see figure 4).9

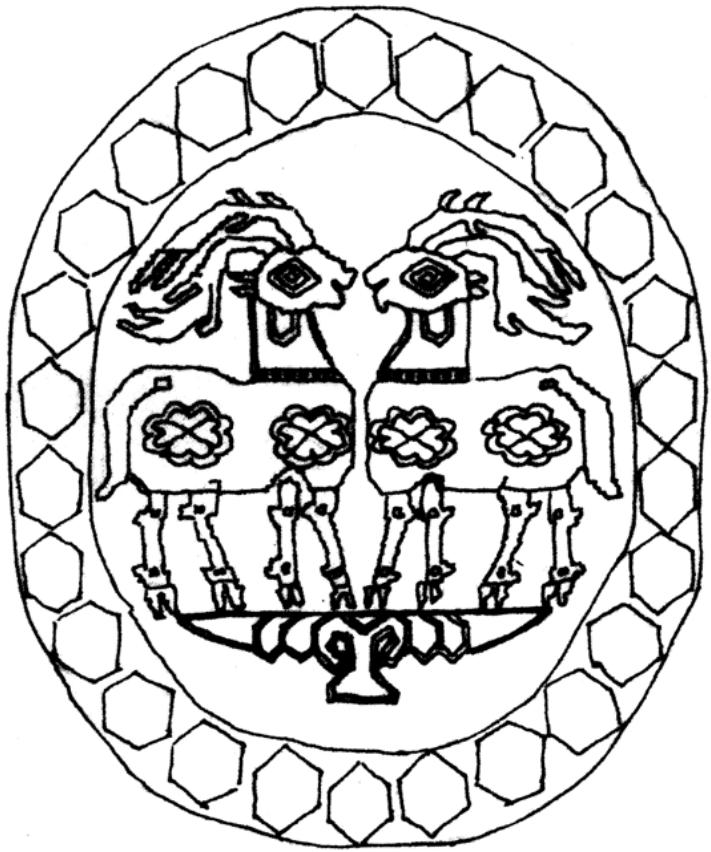


FIGURE 3. Typical Sasanian design woven on silk found at Dunhuang, eighth century. (Drawing by author from a Buddhist banner, the British Museum, MAS 862.a.)

Nanaivandak sold these pieces to his agent in the capital, who had already made contact with one of the general's buyers to the northeast. Through his agent, Nanaivandak also bought the fine silk beloved of his countrymen and of the Turks who lived on the northern borders of his homeland to whom he would sell it on his return to Samarkand. Some silk would go to the Byzantine court to the west. (The Chinese had been producing silk for many millennia before their neighbors finally mastered the technique of delicately

unwinding the gossamer-fine thread from cocoons produced by silkworms reared on the tender young leaves of the white mulberry tree. By Nanaivandak's time, silk was being made by China's neighbors and exported west, but a market still persisted for the Chinese silks.) While Nanaivandak was in Chang'an, Chinese prisoners-of-war captured after a recent clash between the Arabs and the Chinese were being escorted east to Damascus, the site of Arab silk production, where their silk-weaving skills would be exploited.[10] Prisoners from the same battle with paper-making skills were sent to Samarkand, providing the impetus for the transformation of the Arab book, long written on parchment or papyrus.[11]

FIGURE 4. Sogdian silver wine ewer decorated with a winged camel, late seventh–early eighth centuries. Pieces like this were popular in China. (The State Hermitage Museum, Inv. No. S-11. Drawing by author after Marshak 1986, fig. 56.)

Nanaivandak had brought with him a piece of unworked lapis lazuli from Bactria that he now took to a Tibetan

silversmith to be mounted into a necklace for his wife.12 Then, having completed his business, he joined his agent and others for an evening of dining and entertainment: there were many fine Sogdian singers and dancers in the restaurants and wineshops of Chang'an. Nanaivandak had been traveling the Silk Road for twenty years and knew the city well.

They went to one of the many restaurants lining the 500-foot-wide avenue leading south from the imperial city.13 After some discussion about what sort of food they wanted, they chose a place renowned for its spicy noodles, mare-teat grape wine, and dancers.14 Three girls, heavily made-up with elaborate coiffures and smelling of jasmine, leaned over the second-floor balustrade and beckoned them in. Nanaivandak's group removed their shoes and were shown upstairs to the most expensive area of the restaurant. It was divided into compartmentalized seating areas. The floor was covered with reed matting, and they sat on low benches (another Central Asian import to China) at a lacquered table.15 Waiters appeared with silver trays bearing wine and the delicacies of the house.

Mare-teat grapes were grown in Kocho and made into the finest wine. Both the wine and the grapes were imported into China, the grapes packed with ice into thick leaden containers to keep them fresh. The wine was expensive, but Nanaivandak and his fellow merchants had no trouble affording it with the profits from their trade. Drinking was an accepted part of social life in both Samarkand and Chang'an, and it was not unusual to see parties of drunken men and their attendant courtesans staggering out of the wineshops and restaurants late at night.16

After they had eaten their fill, they called for dancers. Two girls appeared to the rapid beating of the musicians' drums and, left hands on hips and their bodies bent slightly like lotus stems, they twirled around, keeping their left legs

almost straight and their eyes firmly fixed on the men. They wore tight-sleeved blouses of fine silk and long flowing skirts of gauze, embroidered in many colors and held at their waists with broad silver belts, and peaked hats decorated with golden bells whose jingling provided a contrast to the rhythmic, deep drum beat. The men shouted encouragement and clapped in time with the music, and the girls' red-slippered feet moved more and more quickly. Suddenly the drummers stopped, the girls stood still facing Nanaivandak's table, and both pulled down their blouses from their shoulders to reveal their small breasts.17 After this, one of the girls sat on Nanaivandak's lap and persuaded him to order more wine, which he drank while fondling her breasts. She was from Chach,18 and they spoke together in Sogdian, but he was soon too drunk to remember much.

Nanaivandak was a Manichaean, a follower of Mani, the third-century prophet from Babylon, though he did not always strictly adhere to the prohibitions on alcohol. The Manichaeans had once formed a strong community in Sogdia and broke ties with the mother church in Babylonia, later turning their attention to evangelism farther east. They considered Mar Ammo, the disciple of Mani who had brought the faith to Transoxania, as the founder of their sect, and they called themselves "the Pure Ones." By the eighth century, the center of this eastern diocese was Kocho in the northern Tarim, and Manichaean monasteries could be found all the way from Samarkand to Chang'an. The schism with the mother church was healed in the eighth century, and the votaries of the eastern diocese recognized the jurisdiction of Mihr, head of the Babylonian community.19

However, by Nanaivandak's time, few of his faith resided in Samarkand and Panjikant. Nanaivandak was brought up as a Zoroastrian but had been converted to Manichaeism by his uncle, who learned about the religion from followers who had fled east to escape persecution in their homeland.20 Apart

from the Zoroastrian and Manichaean communities, there were also communities of Buddhists, Jews, and Nestorian Christians in Panjikant and Samarkand. One of his uncle's friends was a devout Buddhist, though he had brought his faith from India when he settled in Samarkand with the Sogdian wife. However, this friend had since died, and his son, Amoghavajra, had left for China where, the uncle heard, he had become famous as a Buddhist master in the Chinese court.21 Nanaivandak's uncle was glad the son had left because, since the Arab conquest of Sogdia, Islam had become dominant, and many of his countrymen had already chosen to convert.

Before the advent of the Abbasid caliphate in 750, the Arabs had been ruled by the Umayyad caliphate, their capital the city of Damascus. Their armies had crossed the Amu Darya as early as the 670s, but it was not until the first decades of the eighth century, after a long period of internecine strife, that Arab leaders turned their attention seriously to the east. Thereafter, their armies moved steadily eastward, exploiting rivalries among the kings of the semi-independent city-states to turn their enemies into allies. They reached Samarkand in 712 and besieged the city for a month until the residents were forced to surrender and agree to a peace treaty. Then the Arab armies continued their eastward invasion, reaching Chach and Ferghana, the lands to the northeast of Samarkand, in 713 and 714, respectively.22

The land to the north and northeast of Sogdia had long been ruled by alliances of Turkic tribes, sometimes with the support of the Chinese or the Tibetans. In the western part, bordering Sogdia, the Türgesh had taken control at the start of the eighth century and established twenty tribal leaders, called *totoks,* to rule over the areas that owed allegiance.23 Their lands extended from Chach eastward along the lands north of the Tianshan mountains into the Dzungarian basin,

the southern edge of present-day Mongolia. Each totok could muster several thousand warriors, mounted and armed, and, at the height of their rule in the 720s, the Türgesh could raise 200,000 troops through their totoks.[24] This army was essential for the Türgesh, who were constantly fending off attacks from the west by the Arabs, from the south by Tibetans, and from the east by pretenders to their throne from other Turkic tribes, supported by Chinese troops.[25] Other groups of Turkic tribes had already migrated westward by this time, escaping conflict, and had formed the Khazar and Bulgar states around the Volga river.[26]

When the nomadic Arab nobles reached Transoxania, they were encouraged to settle in these lands and promote Islam. The rewards for conversion were not just spiritual: converts were exempted from the poll tax. This inducement proved so tempting that large numbers of Sogdians converted, thereby drastically reducing the tax revenue. In consequence, the exemption was withdrawn, and a new law stipulated that converts also had to be circumcised and were expected to be familiar with Islamic scriptural texts. The changes provoked anger among a population already resentful of their Arab rulers and convinced that the Umayyads protected only the interests of their own aristocratic elite. Between 720 and 722, several major rebellions took place in Sogdia.

Nanaivandak's father and uncle were among the rebels. With the help of their northern neighbors, the Türgesh, the Sogdians succeeded in destroying the Samarkand garrison and driving the Arabs out of the city. The defeated Arab governor, unable to regain control, was replaced by a man infamous for his complaints about the leniency with which his Arab countrymen had treated their Sogdian subjects. Determined to retake the rebel cities, the new governor advanced from the west with a large army, and, realizing that they would probably not be able to hold out, the rebels retreated. Nanaivandak's uncle and his fellow rebels from

Samarkand negotiated refuge in the valleys of Ferghana to the east, unaware that the Ferghanan king had already betrayed them. There they were forced to surrender to the Arab army, and most of the nobles and thousands of commoners were executed. A few nobles escaped and fled north to Chach, where they established themselves as an elite corps in the Türgesh army. Otherwise, only 400 merchants, among them Nanaivandak's uncle, survived, spared because of their great wealth, which their captors hoped to exploit. Indeed, loans from Sogdian merchants to the Arabs had made earlier Transoxanian campaigns possible.27

Nanaivandak's father had fought with a second band of rebels under Devashtich, the ruler of Panjikant. This group took refuge in the fortress of Mount Mug in the mountains to the southeast of Panjikant and, in the same year, 722, the Panjikant Sogdians advanced to meet the Arab army at a nearby gorge, hoping that geographical advantage would give them victory. But they were heavily defeated, and their ruler was killed. Nanaivandak's father did not return from the battle.28

Nanaivandak and his mother hoped that perhaps his father had survived and had joined his countrymen among the Türgesh forces to the north. Already under threat from their northern and eastern neighbors when the Arab armies started to push at their southern boundaries, they were determined to repel any full-scale Arab invasion and so welcomed the escaped Sogdian rebels into their ranks. Thereafter, the Sogdian corps took every opportunity to seek battle with the Arab army in revenge for the earlier slaughter, and their exploits were spoken of in the marketplaces at Samarkand—though not within earshot of the Arabs.

On his return from battle, Nanaivandak's uncle adopted Nanaivandak. The boy and his mother moved from Panjikant

to the uncle's house in Samarkand. Merchants belonged to the second of four classes in Sogdian society, directly below the nobility and above artisans and commoners, and they could afford to build solid, flat-roofed houses of compressed clay and mud bricks, plastered with finer clay. Nanaivandak's old house in Panjikant had friezes in all the rooms depicting traditional tales; when he was small, his mother and father had often told him their stories, and his favorite was that of the fight between Rustam and the demons.[29]

The paintings depicting this story were in two registers along the side walls of the main ceremonial hall of the house. Covering the wall at the end, behind the altar, was a large painting of the patron goddess of their home, the four-armed Nana, seated on a lion (see figure 5). Nanaivandak was named after this life-giving mother goddess: Nanaivandak meaning "slave of Nana."[30] The hall had a high, vaulted brick ceiling lined with plaster with a skylight and carved wooden pillars. Here Nanaivandak's extended family performed religious rites, held meetings to discuss family business, and hosted large banquets on holidays and festivals. The family had been wealthy. They owned land in the valley worked by serfs that produced a sizeable income, and they also received a share of the tolls on the bridge across the river and income from water mills on their land.

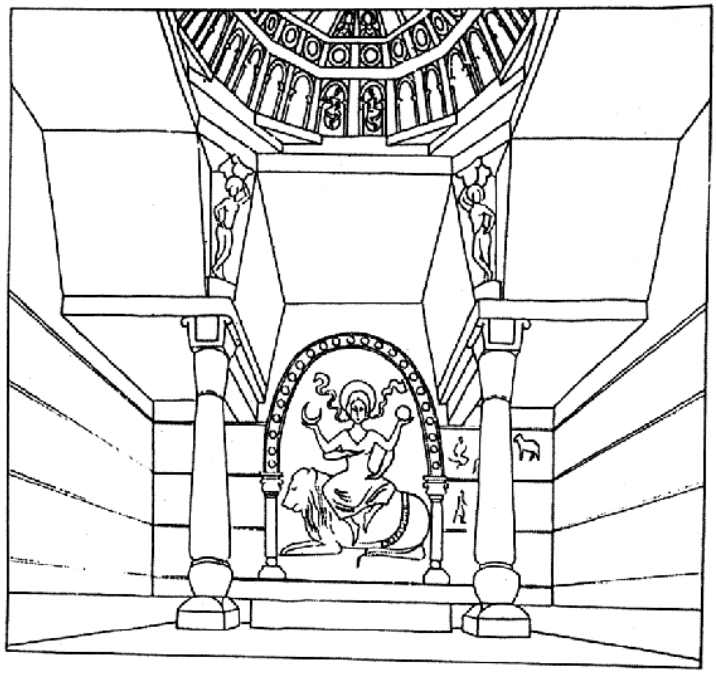


FIGURE 5. Four-armed Nana seated on a lion in a Panjikant house, seventh century. (Drawing by author after Marshak 2002, fig. 3.)

Nanaivandak’s uncle’s house in Samarkand was just as large but less richly decorated than the Panjikant home. Samarkand was a large city on a low hill farther down the Zerafshan valley than Panjikant, but it was just as heavily fortified with eight miles of fifty-foot-high walls punctuated with bastions and barbicans. The streets were no less crowded, and large garrisons of Arab soldiers had taken residence in the upper town, having expelled the residents there. Nanaivandak had little time to explore the city, however, because he was soon busy each day being tutored in the ways of trade and the languages he would need as a merchant—Arabic, Chinese, and some Turkic and Tibetan. (It was usual for Sogdian boys to be educated from the age of five.) It was in Samarkand that he was taught to be a follower of Mani, departing from the Zoroastrian faith of his parents with its fire worship and numerous deities. His uncle tried to

convert Nanaivandak's mother, too, arguing that Mani had proclaimed a religion to supersede all earlier religions, but she continued to attend a Zoroastrian temple in the city with its eternally burning fire. Zoroastrianism had been dying out, however, since the arrival of Manichaeism in Sogdia. Not long after the Arab invasions of Sasanian Iran, many Zoroastrians there fled persecution and established thriving communities in India, now known as the Parsis.31 The last Sasanian ruler had gained refuge in the Chinese court. Manichaean texts were written in a different script from official documents, and Nanaivandak had to learn this, as well, so that he could copy religious texts for his uncle and read to him.

As he grew up, Nanaivandak accompanied his uncle on trading trips to Merv to the southwest, Chach to the northeast, and Balkh to the south whenever the political and military situation allowed. In previous times, his people had gone to the Indus valley to trade with merchants coming up from Barbarikon on the sea, carving their signatures into the rocks along the valley, leaving evidence of centuries of Sogdian trade (see figure 6).32 One of these inscriptions was by an earlier Nanaivandak, who wished for good luck on his journey to see his brother in Tashkurgan.33 His uncle also traded northward with the Turks through the steppes and followed routes westward to the Byzantine empire through the Caucasus, so avoiding the caliphate.34

Unlike his uncle, who traveled simply to make money, Nanaivandak loved the journeys themselves. He found the mountain scenery compelling, and his uncle would often find him in the morning sitting outside as the dawn light suffused the great hulks of the distant Pamir with a pink glow, or in the evening, when he should have been helping to supervise the unloading of the camels, staring into the distance as the evening shadows fell across the great plains and the mountains turned purple before disappearing into the

shadows of the night. This love of travel never left Nanaivandak, and sometimes he even prolonged his journey in order to linger among his beloved mountains.

He especially enjoyed his visits to Balkh, the main Bactrian city situated on a tributary of the Amu Darya at the head of the route south to India. The residents were proud of their city’s history, arguing that it was the real birthplace of Zoroaster and boasting how Alexander the Great had chosen a Bactrian bride and married her in the city over a thousand years before.

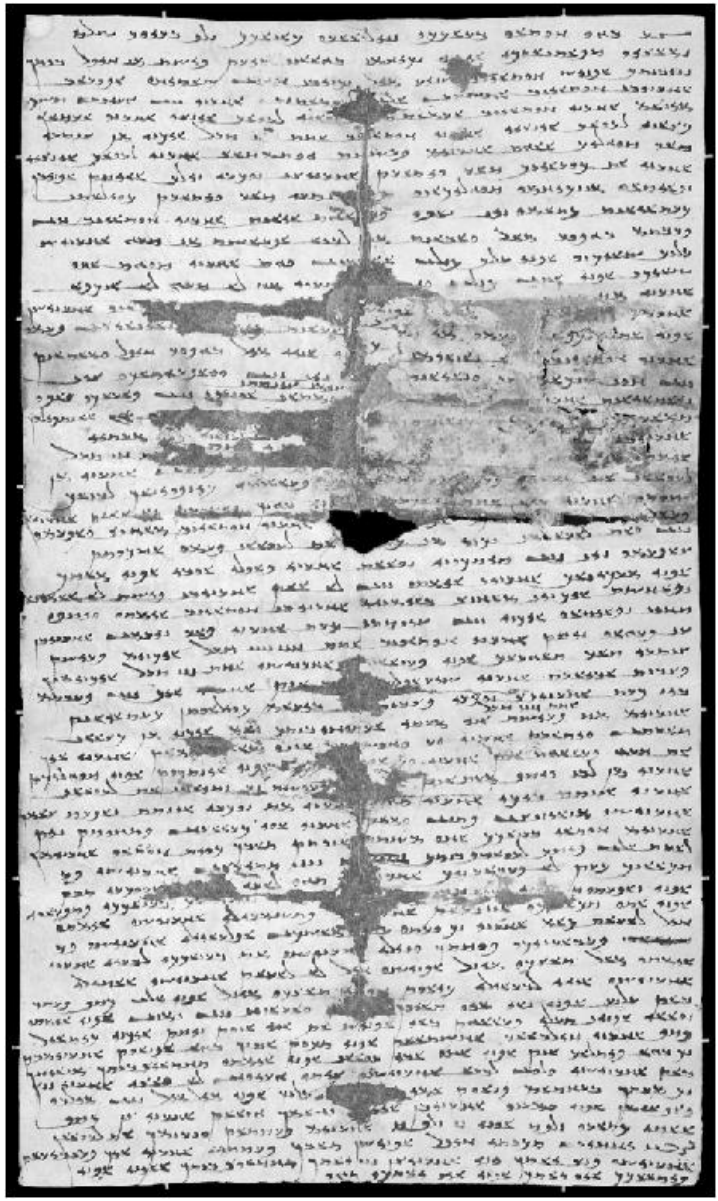


FIGURE 6. Letter from a Sogdian merchant mentioning silk, ca. AD 313–314. (The British Library Board, Or.8212/95.)

In 728, another rebellion arose against the Arabs among the citizens of Samarkand and other Sogdian cities after the rules on conversion to Islam had been changed once more. This time, both the Türgesh to the north and the Tibetans to

the south sent forces to help the rebels and almost succeeded in driving the Arabs out of Sogdia. Many Sogdians who had escaped the Ferghana massacre and joined the Türgesh now returned, but Nanaivandak's father was not among them.

In the late summer of 751, as Nanaivandak rode around the now familiar streets of Chang'an, he recalled his first visit to the Chinese capital. It was 730, and his uncle had decided that Nanaivandak was old enough to accompany him to China on a trading mission. There were reports of Tibetan incursions into the nominally Chinese-controlled Pamir kingdoms to the south, and his uncle therefore decided to take the northeastern route, past Lake Issyk-kul, rather than the southern route via Kashgar, enabling them to avoid the Tibetan armies. Most of the goods they carried would be traded at markets on the way, but some items, such as the gold and gemstones, were destined specifically for Chang'an. Much of the gold was already beaten and worked into filigree ornaments in Persian style by artisans in Samarkand. (Turkic men commonly wore golden belts, often decorated with animal motifs, and in Tibet skilled artisans worked the metal into mechanical toys and ornaments; many of these were presented as gifts to the Chinese emperor.)35

Preparations for the journey were elaborate and meticulously planned. It was over 3,000 miles to Chang'an. Nanaivandak and his uncle would have to pass through Türgesh and Chinese territory as well as the kingdoms of the Tarim basin. On the mountain passes, they would encounter freezing temperatures; in the desert, searing heat. Special footwear and warm furs were required for the former, and head and face coverings for the latter. They traveled with servants and his uncle's young female slave, who served them both en route.36 They were armed: bandits preyed on rich travelers.

The road from Samarkand led to the neighboring kingdom to the northeast, Ustrushana,37 and thence to Khujand on

the Syr Darya, or Jaxartes river. The land of Chach, now under Türgesh rule, started on the far bank.38 The Türgesh ruler, or khagan, and his army had assisted several rebellions by the residents of Samarkand and other cities in Sogdia, and relations between their peoples were friendly. The city of Chach was not as large as Samarkand but nevertheless considerable in size, supported by farming in the temperate valleys and stockbreeding in the mountains. Like Samarkand, it had a citadel, temples of several religions, and numerous houses, shops, and workshops. Previous khagans had built a large palace, but the current Türgesh khagan, Suluk (r. 716–38), had his capital farther east at Suyab nearer his homeland in the northern Tianshan. Nanaivandak and his uncle prayed four times a day, facing the sun during daylight and the moon in the evening, at the main Manichaean temple within the city walls. They also presented alms to the clergy.

From Chach, they took the road east to the valley of the Talas river into the mountains, leaving behind the familiar Transoxanian plains.39 Then there was a long but easy trek through low mountain valleys and passes to Suyab.40 The city was relatively quiet because the ruler and his court were at Issyk-kul, the warm lake. As its name suggests, owing to its brackish waters and sheltered position between the Tianshan and Altai mountains, the lake never froze, even in the coldest winters, and tales were told of great monsters living in its depths. Each winter, the Türgesh khagan moved his court, his army, and his herds there for the winter, so the pastures on either side of the road were filled with tens of thousands of horses, sheep, cattle, and camels.

Nanaivandak and his uncle followed the same route to Issyk-kul. They had set out in early spring, and it was almost summer when they arrived. The khagan and his army were preparing to return to Suyab, having just finished shearing. There was plenty of wool for sale, but his uncle was interested only in the wool from the fat-tailed sheep, which

were not found farther east. He also bought skins from their stillborn lambs, known as karakul.41 He intended to trade both en route.

The khagan's winter camp on the banks of the lake consisted of hundreds of white felt tents, distinctive against the green of the valley floor. That of the khagan himself was the largest, adorned with rich silks and brocades. When Nanaivandak and his uncle went to pay their respects, they were dazzled by the gold and silver ornaments covering the tent's walls and roof.42 The khagan's officials sat in rows on either side of him, dressed in embroidered silk robes, their hair worn in long plaits.43 Nanaivandak noticed the military men sitting in ranks near the khagan. The soldiers wore coarser clothes of felt and carried bows and other weapons. All the men also wore daggers at their belts. The khagan was in a long green robe of the finest silk, slit up the sides. His long hair lay loose down his back, and a broad silk ribbon, tied around his head, reached down his back to his waist.

The mood in the valley was festive. The shearing had been successful, and everyone was glad to be returning home. The horses were sleek and fat from the new grass, and the men spent their last few days hunting with their falcons and dogs in the mountains, galloping back every evening across the valley in a great swoop of noise and color with their kills. During the day, the valley was full of the sound of laughter and noise as the children held pony races and the women packed for the move, and the evenings were no less tranquil, the sound of drunken singing echoing among the flickering light of numerous campfires. Then the tents were loaded onto wooden carts so large that it took several rows of yaks to pull them, and the encampment started its journey back west.

Nanaivandak and his uncle were headed east, but from Issyk-kul they had a choice of routes to Chang'an. The northern route—skirting the northern edge of the Tianshan along the Ili valley and passing through the Türgesh

pasturelands—was the easiest but also the least populated, and many of the goods found in the markets beyond the mountains did not reach there. Instead, Nanaivandak's uncle decided he wanted to visit the markets along the northwestern stretch of the Tarim route to China. It had been several years since he last traveled that way, and he was eager to meet old acquaintances and to see what was for sale. This meant they now had to head south and negotiate the road through the Tianshan. The route was barely passable in winter and was extremely dangerous in spring when melting snow caused great avalanches and ice falls. But Nanaivandak and his uncle met travelers who had just come from the south and who assured them that the worst of the spring thaw was over and that the road south was clear. They stayed for several more days in the Issyk-kul valley to rest their animals, then made arrangements for the next leg of their journey, hiring yaks and more pack horses to carry the large bales of wool. The animal keepers would be paid off when they reached the desert to the south, and there camels would be hired as replacements. Camels were slower but more reliable travelers over the treacherous Taklamakan.

The road south followed one of the river valleys up into the mountains. Four passes had to be negotiated before Nanaivandak's group reached the watershed, and the journey, if all went well, usually took two weeks. The glacial peak of Khan-Tengri, over 22,000 feet high, towered to the west, but, as they drew closer, the view was obscured by the encroaching valley walls. The mountain peak would become a familiar sight on Nanaivandak's later journeys.

Nanaivandak's uncle was used to high mountain passes. Samarkand was separated from the trading markets to the east and south by some of the highest ranges in the world—the Pamir and the Hindu Kush—and the routes across them demanded considerable endurance from travelers. The Tibetans and the peoples who lived in the Pamir kingdoms

were acclimatized from birth to high altitudes, but in battle many of the recruits from the desert towns experienced shortness of breath and headaches. The Tianshan were not so high as the Pamir, but even so the final pass on the road south, just west of the headwaters of the Bedal river, lay at almost 14,000 feet. On reaching its flat, snow-covered saddle, the weather cleared and they were offered a spectacular view of the Bedal valley and, in the distance, the start of the great sand-filled depression of the Tarim basin.

Nanaivandak and his uncle negotiated the descent through the melting snow cover and down into the valley. The track ran along the eastern bank of the river, perched high above its boulder-strewn waters. After traveling for three more days along a gradually widening valley, they reached the caravan town at the valley's mouth. There they stopped to pay off their yak drivers and horsemen, who soon found other customers wanting to travel back across the pass. Nanaivandak's uncle then negotiated the hire of camels for their cargo. Camels were expensive—an animal in its prime might cost fourteen bolts of silk—and the hirers were responsible for the injury or death of any camel during its period of hire.44

Nanaivandak remembered learning from his uncle the unfamiliar names of the Tarim oases. The first stages of the journey led to Aksu, a smallish town compared to Samarkand but important because of its position at the intersection of the north-south road between the Bedal pass and Khotan and the east-west road from Kashgar to Kocho. The road changed daily and even during a day's travel, or stage, from one stopping point to the next. Some of the most difficult stretches occurred when the route traversed marshy ground but then the surface would suddenly become gravel glacis and, a few miles farther on, bare rock. The snow-covered peak of Khan-Tengri to the north, however, was a constant companion, while to the south lay an expanse of grey-yellow

sand.

Their next major stop was Kucha, a thriving city-state. Over the last couple of days before they entered the triple walls of the city, they had passed through fertile and well-farmed country, and the road was lined with poplar trees and fringed with fruit orchards, apricot, pear, pomegranate, and peach all growing in abundance.45 The forest-lined river running to the south of the city plain acted as a natural barrier against the drifting desert sand, providing a welcome relief from the dustiness of the previous stages. Nanaivandak had heard that the dancing girls in Kucha were almost as good as those in Samarkand. The country was ruled by a king who lived in a palace decorated with gold from mines in the Tianshan to the north and jade from the river beds in Khotan to the south. He and his queen were both Buddhists, and their patronage of that religion was much in evidence: the streets were full of monks and nuns with their begging bowls; a large monastery abutted the main market square; and stupas, it seemed, stood at every corner. Several of the stalls in the market were run by monks, who, in addition to scriptures, prayers, and charms, sold drugs and told fortunes. Nanaivandak heard many languages, including Turkic, Chinese—a language he could recognize though not yet really speak—and another tongue that his uncle told him was Kuchean.46

Kucha was one of four Chinese garrison towns along the Silk Road but was ruled by the local Bai family, with the support variously of the Turks, Chinese, and Tibetans. In the seventh century, Tibetans and Chinese had fought for control of this vital corridor of land, and, in 692, the Chinese had the advantage.47 In Kucha, Nanaivandak and his uncle heard of the recent peace treaty signed between the Tibetans and the Chinese, its terms inscribed in both Tibetan and Chinese on a stone stele in Tibet to symbolize its permanence.48 Nanaivandak’s uncle hoped that the peace would last; the

past years of conflict had not been good for trade. The Türgesh had also negotiated peace with the Chinese. The peace meant that the southern route through Khotan and Kashgar would be safe, and Nanaivandak's uncle decided to travel back that way, since both towns had Sogdian communities and were lively, independent cities. Most important for his uncle, Khotan was famous for its jade and jewel markets and attracted merchants from the routes south into India. It would also be an opportunity for Nanaivandak to see these towns for the first time and to be introduced to the Sogdian agents there.49

By this point in their journey, the caravan had settled into the dull routine of desert travel: long, hot stages through a featureless landscape with a poor inn at the day's end if they were lucky; problems with sick camels; cold desert nights; searing daytime heat; dust storms and floods that arose without warning; and the continuing threat of bandits. Stopover places were vital and, during the period of Chinese control, care was taken to keep them open. Some nights found Nanaivandak and his uncle lodging in an inn that was the only building left occupied in an otherwise deserted hamlet. The innkeeper and his wife, often colonists from distant Chinese lands, stayed on because they were paid and given free supplies by the government.50 At other halts, there was only a well and perhaps a few trees to give shelter from the sun. And occasionally there was no water at all, because the surveyors who had built the road were unable to find a source at the end of a single day's stage. Then Nanaivandak and his uncle would set out before dawn or even late at night to try to complete a double stage, but it was wearing on both animals and men. When the heat became unbearable, they started to travel at night.

It was always a relief to reach one of the larger towns, where they could be sure of a good inn and fodder for their animals. Summer nights in the walled towns were

punctuated by the rumble of caravan trains embarking on the next stage of their long journey. The dull clang of bells around the camels' necks warned pedestrians to get out of the way since the narrow streets were barely wide enough to accommodate a loaded camel. In the desert, the bells alerted caravans coming in the opposite direction. When they met, the lead camel-drivers would stop briefly to exchange a few words about their destination and conditions on the road, the state of the wells, or the presence of robbers. Then they would press on: they might have a twenty-mile stage to complete before dawn.

The camels traveled nose to tail in a long line, with each string of between five and fifteen beasts tied together by a rope looped through wooden nose pegs. The cameleers, usually Chinese, Turks, or Tibetans, wore shoes made of felt or thick wool stitched with a scale design, the toes and heels reinforced with leather and turned up to reduce friction with the ground. The soles were sometimes lined with several sheets of paper—a precious commodity—and a drawstring pulled the shoe tight around the ankles to prevent sand entering. The insides were lined with soft red cloth.[51]

The cameleers carried water fl asks fashioned from hollowed-out gourds, light but thick enough to reduce evaporation. If their supply of water ran out or a well was dry, they used the camels to help them find water. The two-humped Bactrian camel is not renowned for its speed—it travels at about two and a half miles an hour—but its life-saving skills as storm-detector and water-diviner are famous, as a fifth-century chronicler noted:

> Occasionally the old camels would roar, huddle together in a group and bury their noses in the sand. This gave warning of fierce, sudden winds, dreaded along the northern route. They would whip up the sands and, although over in a matter of minutes, those without protection over their faces might be left for dead.[52]

At sites of underground water, the older camels would stop and paw the ground, a skill inherited from their wild cousins who still roamed the desert in large herds.[53] The wild camels were generally smaller and difficult to train, so working camels were bred rather than caught. (The Bactrian camel is better suited to the extremes of temperature found in the deserts and mountains of the eastern Silk Road than its single-humped Arabian cousin, for though both have double-lidded eyes and the ability to close their nostrils against the sand, the Bactrian camel is short and stocky and grows long, thick fur in the winter.) The Chinese imperial herds grazing on the steppes to the north numbered hundreds of thousands, many having been received in exchange for silk. There was even a special government department devoted to their care and breeding, and cameleers were paid well for their expertise with clothing and grain. In China, the fastest camels were reserved for the "Bright Camel Envoys" who were dispatched if there was a military crisis on the frontier.[54]

The camel had many other uses for travelers and residents of the Silk Road. A Chinese general marching into battle used one to carry a large tank of fresh water filled with fish to keep him supplied during the campaign; only a camel had the strength and steadiness for the task.[55] And these same qualities were put to use by entertainers. In the marketplaces, young boys would perform acrobatics on a camel's back, and princes and the nobility were often accompanied on their travels by a troop of musicians, all eight of them seated on a large wooden cradle atop a camel.[56] In war, armies used up to two hundred camels to carry their heavy whirlwind guns into battle. Mounted on a wooden frame, the guns revolved, able to shoot their projectiles in all directions in rapid succession.[57] Camels were also eaten, the hump being considered the choicest cut.

Apart from wild camels, Nanaivandak saw wolves, wild

horses, and herds of asses, antelope, and gazelle as well as gerbils and lizards on his first and subsequent desert journeys. Like present-day travelers, he also came across the ruins of long-abandoned towns. People had lived in the oases fringing the Tarim basin for over two millennia, but invasions and changes in the water table or the course of rivers meant that settlements sometimes died. Once the exodus had started, there was soon not enough manpower to maintain the complex irrigation systems, and, over even just one or two generations, the area of cultivable land might shrink so much that it was no longer sufficient to support the remaining population.58 The town would then be abandoned to the constantly shifting desert sands.

Whenever possible, Nanaivandak and his uncle traveled with other merchants. Sometimes they were passed by small groups of travelers on donkeys and mules, faster and cheaper than camels. The aristocracy and high officials preferred to ride horses, especially those bred in the region from Nisa to the Ferghanan valley. The qualities of Nisean horses are recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus, and the Chinese believed them to be part-dragon.59 However, these animals were in short supply, and Turkic horses, though less prized, were more frequently seen. Those were the horses that Nanaivandak and his uncle rode.60

The horror stories circulating among travelers about the desert stages of the Silk Road were not false, though they were sometimes exaggerated, and Nanaivandak's uncle taught him about the stages renowned for their ferocity. The northern route between Anxi and Hami, for example, had few wells and was prone to sudden winds sweeping down from the north.61 Nanaivandak's uncle described it as a stretch without any landmarks other than the bones of travelers and their camels.62 He also warned Nanaivandak never to be tempted to take a shortcut or travel along lesser-used ways, for by doing so he would put himself at the mercy of the

desert itself.[63] Sometimes a small family group, unable to keep up with a large caravan, would branch off onto a seemingly well trodden camel path. Then the path would peter out or a sandstorm would blow up. In either case, the inexperienced travelers would become hopelessly lost and might wander for days until, weakened by hunger and thirst, they were unable to go any further and would simply lie down and die. Soon only their bones would be left, scoured by the wind and sand and bleached by the sun. Nanaivandak's uncle also told him of the whistling wind that sounded like the fabled desert sirens who lured men to their death.

Although the dangers of the desert were real enough, Nanaivandak and his uncle were more at risk from robbers than from thirst, being otherwise well-equipped and using the main routes. On one journey, Nanaivandak's uncle had been traveling with a group of merchants. When he woke in the morning, he found that several of the group had set out secretly before dawn, hoping to reach the next town first and thus secure the best prices for their goods. Nanaivandak's uncle and the remainder of the party came across the bodies of their former traveling companions two hours later at a narrow defile. They had been ambushed and killed, and all their goods taken.[64]

Nanaivandak saw plenty of evidence of death on this first journey: ruined and abandoned towns; carcasses in varying states of decay; petrified trees; and old human and animal bones. Flash floods were another hazard of desert travel; they rose in spring and summer without warning and swept everything away, dashing the unwary against boulders.

On this first journey, Nanaivandak and his uncle broke their journey for several days at the city of Kocho, east of Kucha. They first had to pass the Chinese custom post at Iron Gate on the southwest approach to Kocho and get their

permits for travel in China.65 Kocho was the center of their church, and his uncle wanted to introduce him to the community, to worship, to make confession, and to offer alms. The last was easily achieved, a donation of newly ripened melons, silk, and other goods being distributed to the several monasteries. The city itself was situated in the Turfan basin, smaller in size but much deeper than the Tarim basin, with parts lying over 500 feet below sea level. It was now summer, and the heat was so intense that the wealthiest residents had retreated to special apartments built in the basements of their houses. The nomads who camped on the plain during the winter had moved into the mountains to the north, and everyone else tried to do as little as possible and sit next the irrigation canals where the shade of the trees and the constantly flowing spring water offered some respite.

The travelers now left the Taklamakan desert but had to cross the end of the Gobi desert before reaching the haven of the Hexi corridor (a passage between a mountain range and a desert). On the route to Hami were numerous wells, but then, after a couple more stages, the road left the protection of the northern mountains and veered southeast toward Anxi. Nanaivandak soon understood why this tract of the route was spoken of with such dread. Their camels were well fed, but they were still exhausted when only halfway into each day's stage. There was no chance of respite; the energy produced by the last meal soon ebbed, and the bleached animal bones along the path were a constant reminder of what happened to those who had to be left behind. Moreover, all the well water along this stretch of the route was brackish and only induced a greater thirst, but Nanaivandak's uncle had purchased extra gourds for carrying fresh spring water from Hami.

The first few stages took them through granite hills. The surface of the road was composed of huge boulders alternating with multi-colored granite grit, and the skin of

the small desert lizard, usually grey, had here taken on many hues so that it blended into the surrounding ground. Five days from Hami, they reached a narrow ravine in which a well with water less brackish than the rest on this route supplied a small village. But they did not linger. They had another six days to Anxi across the “Black Gobi,” so-called because the constant winds had swept away any covering of sand and left a surface of grey grit mixed with small black pebbles. Their most difficult day was the third, when the desert was covered with a thick salt crust. The camels hated its soft, spongy surface and were constantly stopping and spitting when the cameleer tried to get them to move on. The sun was already high in the sky before they reached the inn at the end of the stage. Two days later, when they caught sight of the Chinese defensive walls northwest of Anxi, they were all extremely relieved—even Nanaivandak, who normally relished the hardships of travel. A journey of less than two months would take them to the great city of Chang’an, their destination, along a road protected from bandits by the wall and its garrisons of Chinese soldiers, from thirst by the streams flowing from the Nanshan (the southern mountains), and from the sand-filled desert winds by the Beishan (the northern hills). The landscape became greener, and they gradually left the grey-yellow desert behind.

The main Chinese border post was at Wuwei, another crossroads with routes leading north to the Ordos region and steppes beyond, and south to Koko Lake (Koko-nor) and the Tibetan plateau. After showing their papers and paying the necessary customs duty on their goods along with a little extra to facilitate the paperwork, Nanaivandak and his uncle found an inn in the town and traded the karakul lambskins they had bought from the Türgesh at Issyk-kul to some of their resident countrymen.66 After leaving the town, they crossed the Yellow river winding its loess-laden, sluggish

course from its source in Tibet to the south. The countryside now was well cultivated and dotted with farms and villages, and there was plenty to divert Nanaivandak on the last stages to Chang'an. After crossing the final mountain pass, only 9,000 feet in elevation and well guarded by Chinese soldiers, they passed through the deeply ravined loess landscape typical of northwestern China and then finally descended into the plain of Chang'an with its groves of persimmons and fields of summer wheat.

They entered the Chinese capital through the western gate, from which the road led directly to the Western Market, where most of the merchants from Central Asia conducted their trade (see figure 7). Over two hundred merchants' guilds were represented in the vast walled market area, and there was even a lake under the walls in the northeastern corner, fringed with willows and blossoming fruit trees.67 His uncle had an agent in Chang'an who arranged for the sale of their goods, and, because the trade routes had been closed for a while, they received high prices. The goods were taken to warehouses built against the market's enclosing walls. The day after their arrival, Nanaivandak's uncle showed him around. Over 3,000 shops lined the market's small lanes, each displaying the goods of its guild: gold and silver wares, ginger, silk gauze, fresh fish, dried fish, crabs, goldfish, sugared cakes, saddlery, ironwork, scales and measures, medicine, flowers, vegetables, and much else. There were also streets of shops offering various services: printers, pawnshops, safe-deposit shops, moneylenders, brothels, teahouses, and restaurants. It seemed to Nanaivandak that anything could be had in Chang'an.

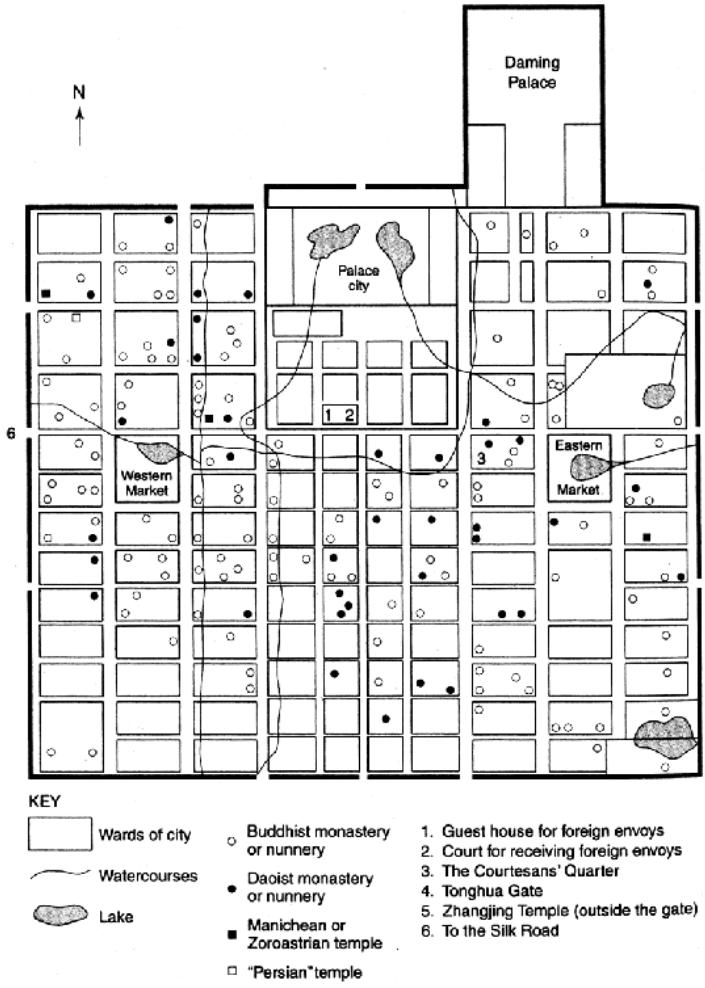


FIGURE 7. Plan of eighth-century Chang'an. (After Xiong 2000, fig. 9.1.)

In 751, twenty-one years after this first journey, Nanaivandak would have noted that the market and the city of Chang'an had changed little, only becoming more familiar with long acquaintance. But there had been many changes in Sogdia and elsewhere along the Silk Road. For much of these two decades, the Arab conquerors of Samarkand had been distracted by internal rivalries farther west. These had only been resolved the year before Nanaivandak embarked on his most recent journey, with the fall of the Umayyad caliphate

and the rise of the Abbasids in 750.

Along the land north of the Silk Road, things had changed too. By 750, the Eastern Turk confederation had broken up and been driven out of the steppes north of the Tarim. It was replaced by another confederation of Turkic tribes, the Uygurs, who were to rule for almost a century. In the west, the Türgesh, after signing a peace treaty with the Chinese to protect their eastern flank, had formed an alliance with the Tibetans—sealed with a marriage between a Tibetan princess and the Türgesh khagan in 734—and combined to fight the Arabs on their western flank. The peace with the Chinese did not last long, however. After the execution of one of their envoys by the Chinese, the Türgesh besieged the Silk Road garrisons in 735. Twice heavily defeated, they again sought peace with the Chinese, and it was accepted in 736. They were more successful against the Arab armies, inflicting heavy defeats in Transoxania throughout the 730s until rivalry between two Türgesh chiefs put an end to their unity and power.

The Chinese-Tibetan peace treaty, signed in 730 during Nanaivandak's first visit to Chang'an, lasted five years but was followed by decades of bloody battles between these two old foes.68 They fought for control of the Tarim routes and those into India across the Pamir. In the eastern arena, the Chinese usually had the upper hand in summertime, but the Tibetans would raid the Chinese army camps every autumn just after the harvest and steal the grain so that the land became known as the "Tibetan grain estates." The Tibetans were dominant in the western arena—the Pamir. But, by the late 740s, the Chinese emperor Xuanzong, at the height of his power and determined to inflict defeat on the Tibetans, was finally successful in both arenas. The last Chinese counterattack in the Pamir took place in 747. The Chinese routed the Tibetan forces, and the successful general—a Koguryo called Ko Sonji—was nicknamed Lord of the

Mountains of China.[69] In the east, the Chinese armies also started to gain the upper hand under the leadership of a half-Turkic general who, Nanaivandak heard, had Sogdian blood. There was another Turkic-Sogdian general in the Chinese forces called Rokshan, and word had it that he was in favor with the emperor despite his recent defeat on China's northern frontier.[70] By 751, therefore, the Chinese empire seemed preeminent, though it was soon to become clear that it had reached the limits of its expansion and power.

On his journey to Chang'an in 751, Nanaivandak had encountered a Chinese army on its way to meet the Arab forces northeast of Sogdia. They were led by Ko Sonji, who, after his success in the Pamir, had inflicted a heavy defeat on Türgesh and other forces in Sogdia.[71] Now the Arabs were threatening to conquer the Chinese garrisons in the Tarim, and so General Ko was sent west again to confront them. The two forces met at the Talas river to the northwest of the Tianshan, on the fault line of Chinese and Arab power. The battle lasted five days and was only decided when one of the tribal armies supporting the Chinese changed its allegiance. The Chinese fled in disarray, but, as mentioned above, many were captured and sent to Samarkand or to Damascus. One captive, Du Huan, returned to China in 762 and wrote an account of his travels to the heartland of the Arab caliphate and Africa.[72]

Nanaivandak had been traveling for two decades and was accustomed to armies on the march. They usually left merchants and other travelers alone, though their requisitions from the local community sometimes meant that it was difficult to find supplies. He had traveled alone after his uncle's death. Most of his countrymen did not make the long and arduous journey all the way to China, but he had retained his love of the mountain landscapes and his zest for trade: the markets in the Silk Road towns and especially in Chang'an still fascinated him. He was fortunate to live in a

period of relative stability on the Silk Road and at a time when China still welcomed foreigners.[73] He did not imagine then that the journey of 751 would be the last he would make to China.

TWO

The Soldier's Tale

SEG LHATON, 747–790

The Tibetan men and horses all wear chain mail armour of extremely fine workmanship. It envelops them completely leaving openings for only the eyes so that strong bows and sharp swords cannot injure them. When they do battle they must dismount and array themselves in ranks. One dies and another takes his place. To the end they are not willing to retreat. Their lances are long and thinner than those in China and their archery is weak. Even when not in battle the men carry swords.

DU YU, *Tongdian,* AD 801[1]

IN THE 780s, Seg Lhaton, a Tibetan soldier, was quartered in a fort at Miran in the southern Tarim, over a thousand miles from his home.[2] His countrymen had retaken Miran and many other towns and army garrisons from the Chinese over the past two decades, and they now controlled the route between Sogdia and China, shutting off trade and diplomatic missions between Samarkand and Chang'an and thereby stopping one source of China's wealth and power. A few merchants had recently managed to get through by going

north of the Tianshan, but this was Uygur-held territory, and the merchants had to pay a toll for safe passage.[3] Most did not attempt the route; even Nanaivandak, a consummate traveler and trader, had to rest content with making deals closer to Samarkand. His 751 journey to Chang'an would be his last.

The vassal tribes under the Uygurs in the north resented their rulers, and the Tibetans were debating whether to send troops to assist them in rebellion. The Tibetans were also keen to retake Khotan, an independent city-state to the west of Miran that still owed nominal allegiance to the Chinese. The loyalty of Khotan to China was largely irrelevant because Chinese troops and officials could no longer reach it, but occupation of the state would be of strategic use to Tibet, and its grain and food supplies would help feed the Tibetan soldiers garrisoned on the Silk Road.

It was harvest time, and the Tibetan army camp at Miran was stocking up on grain for the winter and for the possible Uygur campaign. Local farmers gave a portion of their crops to the military in return for protection, labor, and the loan of animal and implements, but the fort was also sent extra supplies of barley and animals from Tibet. The camp commander assigned his men to provisions duty—checking and recording existing stores. Seg Lhaton, a squad leader and a veteran, was among them.[4] It had been years since he had last seen his family.[5] They were farmers in southern Tibet, the home of the founders of the Tibetan empire. Kings of this region had defeated the nomadic peoples in the north and west of Tibet during the late sixth and early seventh centuries in a series of victories referred to as "the southern bamboo defeating the northern yak,"[6] and thereafter they founded the vast mountain empire of Bod.[7] Diplomatic relations with China were established in 608, but it was not until a decade later that the Tibetan ruler's consolidation of

his empire was complete, and only in 633 was the capital established at Lhasa. The Tibetan emperor then had to turn his attention to his neighbors, especially the Chinese, and over the next century relations were conducted by both diplomacy and war.8

The Tibetan emperor required a strong army to support his diplomacy and to deal with internal and external enemies. For Seg Lhaton, as for all his countrymen, military service was obligatory. The Tibetan armies were huge, the adult male population of the Tibetan empire being augmented with recruits from their many colonies, which ranged from the Azha kingdom near Koko-nor and the Indo-European city-state of Kucha on the northern Silk Road to the Pamir mountain kingdoms of Wakhan and Little Balur in the west.9 Earlier wars, however, had taken their toll. Tens of thousands of soldiers had died in the battles against the Chinese, and it was only in recent years that the Tibetans had gained dominance of the Silk Road.

The Tibetans chose Miran as the site for their main eastern garrison because of the town's strategic importance and access to Tibet. Miran lay at the point where two direct routes from the Tibetan plateau beyond the Kunlun mountains to the south emerged onto the main east-west routes. Both routes went through the great grazing grounds of the Tsaidam basin: the first along the Jahan-sai river that watered Miran over the Altun mountains and following the Chimen-tagh mountains southwest; the other heading eastward in the direction of Dunhuang before turning south to cross the Nanshan or Southern mountains, the eastward continuation of the Altun, and on to the Tsaidam. There was also a direct route from Tibet to western Khotan, but the road passed through terrain too poor to support an attacking army.

The main road east from Miran to Dunhuang traversed the belt of gravel glacis that extended for as much as seventy

miles at the lower slopes of the mountains before the land leveled and the salt-encrusted desert wastes took over. In ancient times, the road had bifurcated a short march east of Miran, one route hugging the Kunlun, the other crossing the Lop desert. Travelers were advised to attempt the latter only in winter when there was still ice available at the salt springs south of the dried-up inland sea, Lop-nor, to cut as supplies for the next stages of the journey; water was otherwise extremely scarce.10 After the fourth century, an increasing lack of water forced the villages servicing even this route to be abandoned, and it soon ceased to be a regular thoroughfare. Miran, once a town of eight or nine thousand people, became less populous after this.11

By the time Miran was occupied by Tibetan forces—from the mid-eighth century—it had shrunk to a small settlement. The soldiers and their camp followers gave it a new lease on life. The Jahan-sai river flowed down from the Kunlun over uncultivatible gravel beds, and much of the water was dissipated or evaporated en route, but when it emerged in the loess deposits at the edge of the desert it was carefully channeled into a large canal with branches and sub-branches feeding the fields. The main canal was sixty feet at its widest and over thirty feet deep, and it flowed five miles beyond the river before branching into seven main divisions. When they were first built, several centuries previously, the branch canals continued on for two or three more miles, subdividing into smaller and smaller channels. This fan of irrigation had then supported a fertile area of ten square miles.12 Beyond the fields, the water continued underground, feeding the ubiquitous desert tamarisk. The network of tamarisk roots would hold the sand while that around it was swept away by wind and water, leaving large mounds, some up to fifty feet high, which could be seen stretching into the immediate distance. Beyond this, there was only sand.

When Seg Lhaton was quartered in Miran, the canal

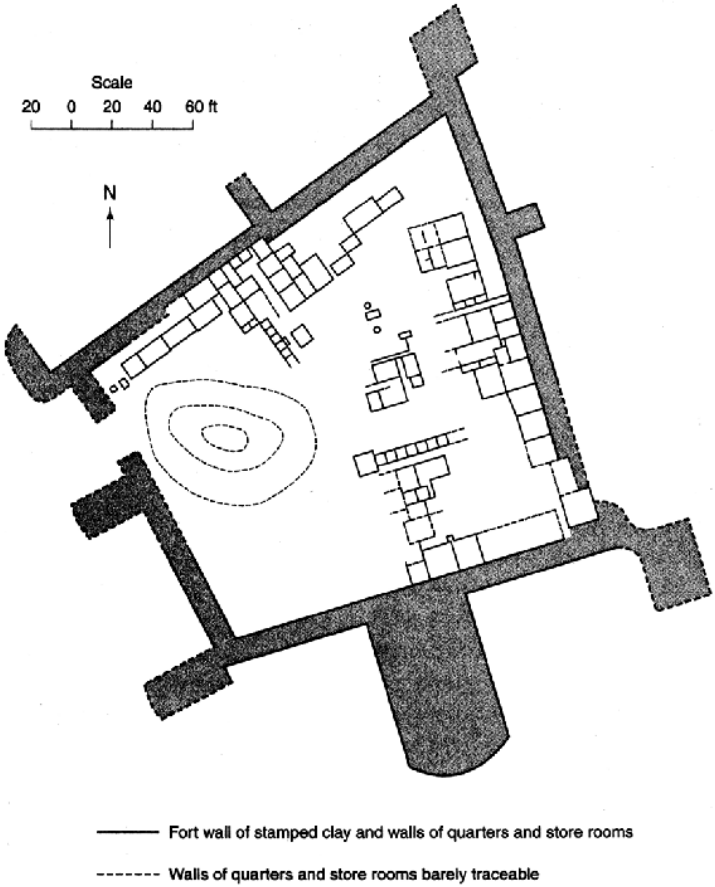
system was no longer all in use. The town's population was now too small to maintain it, and many of the sub-branches had become clogged so that sand and then tamarisk had encroached into the once-fertile fields of wheat. Seg Lhaton and his squad were tasked with keeping the remaining canals clear under the direction of the irrigation officer. One of the main problems, ironically, was flooding. There were two flood periods: early spring, when the ice in the riverbed itself and the snow in the lower mountains melted; and early summer, when the snow and ice on the higher ranges did the same. The summer floods were often uncontrollable. Great quantities of water surged over the ends of the canals, inundating the fields and turning them into marshy quagmires, ruining the crops. In winter, the river froze, spreading out in a large sheet of ice.

Other than irrigation and agricultural work, the soldiers had various daily duties. For example, they were required to make bricks from the local soil and mud in order to repair the fort and build new quarters. The fort was an irregular quadrangle, its longest side measuring 240 feet, with projecting bastions at each corner and in the center of each wall (see figure 8). The southern bastion was the largest, over forty feet high, topped with a seven-foot parapet and made of stamped earth that was strengthened by layers of tamarisk stalks.13 The fort had only been built a few decades earlier when the Tibetans reoccupied the southern Tarim.

Soldiers were also sent to collect bundles of wood from the copses of poplar trees in the desert and from the stunted poplar, willow, and juniper trees growing in the mountain gorges. Young trees that occasionally grew up after the summer floods were soon chopped down. Some of the wood was cut into strips for tallies of supplies that were sent to nearby watch stations and other forts.14 The rest was used, along with tamarisk, as firewood and building materials. When there was no wood for fires, the solders used animal

dung, yak being the best. On the Tibetan plateau, yaks were used as pack animals and for agricultural work, but here it was too hot; instead, the soldiers had ponies. Seg Lhaton, like his fellow soldiers, did most of the repairs to his clothes and kit himself, and when his armor and clothing were beyond repair they were thrown, like everything else, onto one of the rubbish heaps. He also helped maintain the watch of eight three-hour periods and provided relief for soldiers stationed at the network of hill stations at strategic points on the roads out of Miran.

Being posted to one of the hill stations was considered a hardship. The men had to spend long hours in cramped quarters below the beacon tower, ready to light the carefully prepared firewood at a moment's notice. Each tower had three raised fire brackets. An incendiary fuse enclosed in a tube ran from each bracket down to the soldiers on duty below. To light the fuses, they used a fire drill and tinder made from local flammable material such as wormwood. Two fires signaled an alert, and three meant the appearance of enemy troops. A single fire was the all-clear signal. Each small tower was manned by only four men equipped with the company's standard and battle drums as well as weapons. One of them was a cook, often Khotanese, and they were regularly sent new supplies.15


Scale
20 0 20 40 60 ft
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Fort wall of stamped clay and walls of quarters and store rooms
Walls of quarters and store rooms barely traceable

FIGURE 8. Plan of Tibetan fort at Miran. (Stein 1921, plan 30.)

The commander at Miran had recently dispatched a squad of men to relieve a remote watch station on a mountain pass to the south. Several of the soldiers there had fallen ill and were being brought back to the fort to recuperate under its resident doctor. The watch station leader sent a message with the returning soldiers confirming the safe arrival of the relief troops and adding that since "there was not a single female companion for the soldiers, the commander is begged to send at once many serving women."16 Not many women worked in the fort at Miran but a few were rounded up; the only prostitutes available at these remote stations were those kept for this purpose by the army. In smaller camps, they

doubled as maids and general domestic servants.

When he was not on duty outside Miran, Seg Lhaton lived in a small room built inside the eastern end of the fort. On the Tibetan plateau, soldiers' families were often resident in the forts, but this border posting was too distant and poor. The room was barely ten feet square, but here he both ate and slept. There was no rubbish or sewage collection in this outpost—where would it be taken? The soldiers simply threw garbage into a corner, and, when the room became too odorous and messy to be used as quarters, it was turned into a latrine. Finally, rubbish from elsewhere was shoveled in until the small room was full of human and other wastes of the camp when it was abandoned, and new rooms were progressively built along the inside of the fort walls to provide replacement quarters.[17] Sand encroached into the gaps of the rubbish-filled rooms and this, along with the natural dryness of the desert, controlled the stench. The dryness also preserved the rubbish, a mixed blessing for archaeologists excavating the site over a thousand years later.[18]

It was a rudimentary existence, and Seg Lhaton would have much preferred to be farming his own land far to the south in the Yarlung valley. Although it did not offer rich living, the valley was green and lush, set amid the backdrop of the Himalayas. At Miran, the earth was sere-grey and the Altun mountains to the south were hidden in an almost permanent haze of dust. There was little entertainment on offer. Caravans with their attendant storytellers, dancers, and acrobats rarely passed. A few of the soldiers played instruments or sang, but the time was mostly spent in recounting former battles. Seg Lhaton was often asked to tell of his experiences in the Pamir and Koko-nor campaigns against the Chinese.

The peace treaty of 730 between Tibet and China had been broken in 737 by a Chinese invasion, and since then relations

between the two countries had deteriorated.19 Another peace treaty was not approved until 762. In between, many bloody battles were fought that concentrated on two fronts: the northeastern border between Tibet and China, and the route from the Silk Road into India across the Pamir mountains to the west of Tibet. By the 740s, the Chinese had predominated, owing to the leadership of two outstanding foreign generals and the wholehearted support of the Chinese emperor, Xuanzong, who was at the height of his powers. He poured men and resources into the campaigns, determined to defeat the Tibetans and take control of the trade routes.

In the east, the Chinese and the Tibetans met several times around Kokonor, a great lake 10,000 feet above sea level and land of the Mongolian Azha.20 Long before, China had fought the Azha for control of this land, which lay on the main route between China and Tibet. However, the Azha were fierce warriors and had taken advantage of the change in dynasties in China in 618 to regain control of their land. The Chinese took it back in 634, thus effectively removing the buffer between Tibet and China. Several years of war and diplomacy between the two followed, with the Azha as pawns in the power struggle, until in 641 a *modus vivendi* was reached, following which a Chinese princess was sent to marry the Tibetan emperor, and the sons of Tibetan noblemen were sent to China to study. In fact, the princess was not in the direct imperial line, but she was of royal blood. The two countries recognized each other as equals, though the Chinese insisted on referring to their relationship as that between an uncle and a nephew.21

Hostilities broke out again in the late 730s, and those around Koko-nor were among the fiercest. The battles went one way and another until eventually the Chinese were driven back, forced to relinquish all but an island in the lake. Both sides sought control of a fortress twenty-five miles east

of the lake and, according to the boundaries stipulated in the 730 treaty, in Chinese territory. The fortress was called Stone Fort by the Chinese and Iron Blade by the Tibetans, and it lay on high ground between the valleys of the Yellow and Yangzi rivers, controlling the main road between Lhasa and Chang'an as well as access to the rich meadows of the Koko-nor.22 When the Tibetans retook Iron Blade in 741, the Chinese emperor was furious, demanding that the military governor of the region mount a counterattack. In an act of great courage, he refused, replying that: "The fortress is strongly defended by the whole Tibetan nation. If we array our troops below we cannot capture it without incurring several tens of thousands of deaths among our men. I am afraid that what would thereby be gained is not comparable to what would be lost."23 He almost lost his own life for this insubordination but was spared execution on the intervention of a rising young general, Geshu Han, who was appointed as military governor in his place.24 When the emperor later ordered Geshu Han to attack Iron Blade, he could hardly refuse.

Seg Lhaton had been among the Tibetan ranks that faced this Chinese attack. He would relate that story another day. For now, he wiled away the time with his companions in the lonely fort at Miran by telling them of another battle that had taken place two years before the attack on Iron Blade in the Pamir mountains to their west. The Tibetans had established their rule over the small valley kingdoms that controlled the routes through the Gilgit river valley that led to northern India. During the early 740s, the Tibetan army had encountered the Chinese army several times in these valleys and had always been victorious. They were not so fortunate in the summer of 747. Seg Lhaton remembered the battle vividly.25

His division was with the main forces of the army, 9,000 men, deep in the mountains. They had marched to the village

of Sarhad on the Amu Darya (Oxus river) in the kingdom of Wakhan between the Pamir and the Hindu Kush mountains. Then as now, the Amu Darya ran west from its source in the Pamir south of Kashgar, then turned northwest and emerged from the mountains to skirt Sogdia before debouching into the Aral Sea. Not far from its source, it had already become a great grey-brown river, flowing in a deep gorge through the mountains until just east of Sarhad, where the mountain sides retreated slightly and the river spread out over the valley floor. One of the tributaries leading into it there from the south flowed along a valley wide enough for pack animals and humans. At the valley's head lay two passes in succession, the Baroghil and the Darkhot. The latter led to the mountainenclosed kingdom of Little Balur, then also controlled by the Tibetans, and to the high reaches of the Gilgit river valley, which in turn led to Kashmir, Tibet, and India (see figure 9).

Tibetan spies brought back reports to the army camp at Sarhad of Chinese forces, estimated at 10,000 men and led by General Ko Sonji, approaching from the Silk Road to the north. The spies had tracked the Chinese army's progress over several months through the Tarim from Aksu to Kashgar, and then to the Chinese military bases near Tashkurgan. The general at Sarhad, on hearing the intelligence, was sanguine: he did not expect all these men with their horses to negotiate the Pamir. And even if they did, their progress would be slow because they would be encumbered with supplies for both men and beasts; grazing in the Pamir valleys was woefully insufficient to support a large number of horses, and the single supply line would be overextended. Moreover, the Tibetan general had already taken advantage of the terrain at Sarhad. Should the Chinese forces reach them, his own forces were well protected. He had ordered his men to build palisades at a point where the road south to Little Balur along the tributary valley narrowed a few miles distant from

the Amu Darya and where the sides of the valley were sheer rock. The ground there was marshy, and the palisades, made from wood obtained higher up the valley, were easily driven into the soft ground. When the advancing Chinese forces met the palisades, they would be unable to advance further or climb around the palisades. The main Tibetan forces were positioned south of the palisades. Seg Lhaton and his fellow soldiers could all see how the approaching Chinese army would thus be trapped in the narrow defile. Moreover, the Tibetan archers could send volleys of arrows over the palisades and into the confused mass of Chinese soldiers on the other side, where they would be easy targets.

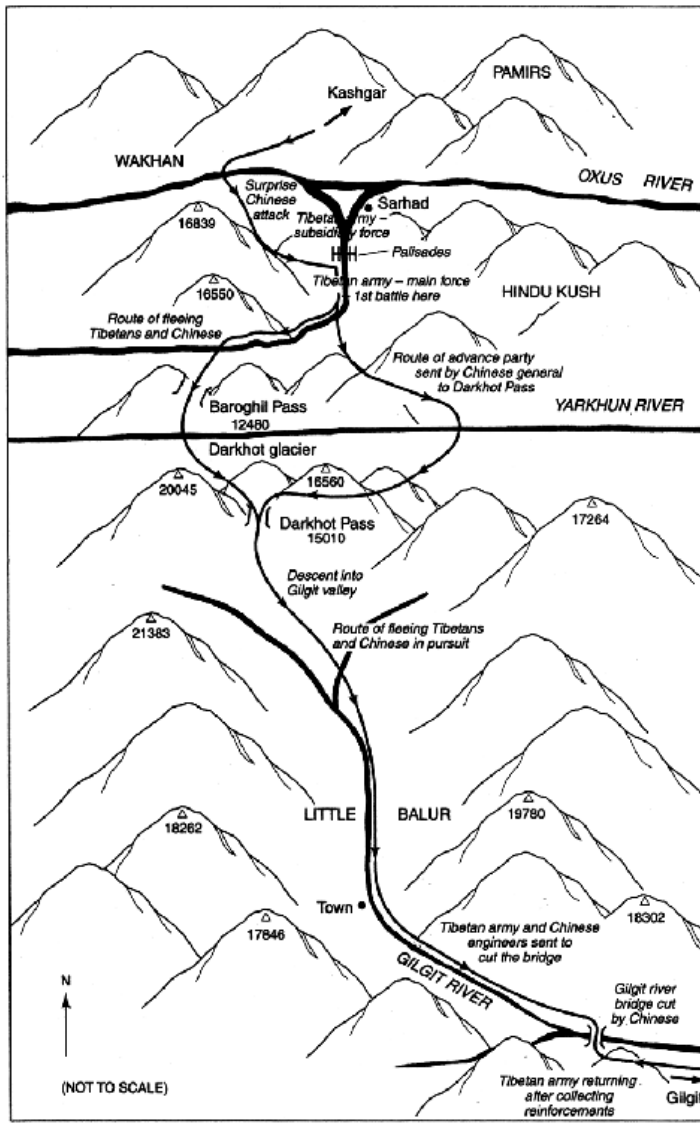

FIGURE 9. Plan of battle sites in Wakhan and Little Balur. (Drawing by author.)

Seg Lhaton used a stick to draw the positions of the two sides on the clay wall of his room. Many of the soldiers at Miran were too young to have seen service in the Pamir, but they understood mountain terrain. He drew the Amu Darya and showed the position of a squad of 1,000 men left to hold its southern bank. Their role, he explained, was to harass and

delay the Chinese forces from crossing the river from the north and to provide the main Tibetan army with advance warning of an attack. They would also draw the Chinese army toward the tributary valley and into the trap. The Tibetans had defeated three other Chinese armies sent to take the kingdoms of Wakhan and Little Balur over the past seven years, and they were confident that they could defeat another. Seg Lhaton was a veteran of those campaigns and had been promoted through the ranks to deputy squad commander.

The river was in summer spate and therefore the Tibetan squad did not attempt to cross to confront the Chinese soldiers arriving from the north. In any event, the Tibetans had an excellent defensive position on the southern bank. Moreover, Seg Lhaton explained, they expected the Chinese to reach the opposite bank in disarray: there would be plenty of time to choose the day for battle, and any delay, the Tibetans believed, would be to their advantage. “We thought that the Chinese supply lines would be stretched and that the enormous Chinese army could not survive long in the Pamir, while our forces had an assured supply line through Little Balur to the south.”26 He then told how the large Chinese army approached and set up camp on the north bank of the river over several days. The Tibetans prepared for a wait while the river subsided.27

The next morning, Seg Lhaton awoke to noise and confusion. At first, he was only aware of his fellow soldiers beyond the palisades to the south in battle with Chinese troops, but then he saw Chinese soldiers behind him as well. None of the Tibetan commanders were prepared for this, and panic spread through the ranks. Seg Lhaton and his companions were forced back against their own palisades, and many of his squad were killed or injured. That night, he and his fellow survivors scrambled up the steep valley sides and found breaks in the Chinese lines so that they could flee

up the valley to the south, toward the passes and Little Balur. They had to leave most of their spare horses and supplies behind, along with the bodies of their comrades.

The following day, remnants of the Tibetan army were still crossing the first pass, the Baroghil. When they eventually regrouped, it was estimated that they had lost half their troops, over a thousand horses, and many of their supplies. An immediate counterattack was out of the question, but the Tibetans held the kingdoms to the south where fresh supplies and men were available. The Tibetan general therefore ordered his men to retreat south to Little Balur in the Gilgit valley, a Tibetan protectorate. The second pass, the Darkhot, which led to this valley kingdom, was one of the highest in the range—over 15,000 feet—and held a huge glacier squeezed into the valley between the mountain peaks. The descent into Little Balur on the other side of the pass was precipitous and would be certain to encourage dissent in the Chinese forces should they try to follow, for they were unused to mountain terrain. The track dropped almost 6,000 feet in little more than five miles before any suitable camping ground could be reached, and the terrain consisted of moraine and bare rock, made treacherous by the layer of ice. No Chinese general had successfully crossed this pass with an army.

Moreover, Seg Lhaton continued, the Tibetans had loyal supporters in Little Balur: the queen was a Tibetan princess, given as a bride to the king in 740, only seven years before. Twelve miles beyond the town to the south was the bridge across the Gilgit river gorge. The road then continued along the gorge on the right bank, following the winding river to the town of Gilgit and, beyond, to the Indus valley. There the Tibetans could resupply and obtain more horses to mount a counterattack while the Chinese forces were still undecided at the top of the Darkhot pass. Seg Lhaton scratched another sketch in the clay wall of the room. The Gilgit river, he

explained, was impassable in the summer beyond this bridge because of the ice melt from the mountain peaks, so the Tibetans could be assured that if they held the bridge—the only one across the river accessible from Little Balur—the Chinese could not advance further south that season. But they planned to meet the Chinese soon after they had crossed the Darkhot pass and before they reached the town of Little Balur, and drive them back across the pass. It was certain that the Chinese army could not retain its discipline up the precipitous mountain track, and there would be ample opportunity to launch waves of attacks. The Chinese would probably also be forced to leave many supplies and horses behind in a forced retreat, which would compensate for those the Tibetan forces had just lost.

It was almost thirty miles south to the foot of the Darkhot pass from the Baroghil pass, and another thirty from its summit to Little Balur. The Tibetan commanders expected that the Chinese would take at least seven days to cover the distance. Encumbered with pack animals, they would be lucky to cover more than ten miles a day, and then there was the Darkhot pass itself to negotiate. The Tibetans did not post men in the town but, after assuring themselves of the loyalty of its officials, they crossed the bridge over the Gilgit river and established camp where the valley widened some miles beyond. At the same time, men were sent ahead to obtain reinforcements and supplies from the next garrison. The general planned to attack as soon as the reinforcements arrived, catching the Chinese by surprise.

The extra soldiers arrived quickly. Only eight days had passed since the original Tibetan forces had fled in disarray from Wakhan. Now they returned along the Gilgit river, freshly prepared for battle. Seg Lhaton described his eagerness to confront the Chinese again: he had lost many friends in the previous encounter and wanted revenge. “We were not used to defeat,” he said. In his three previous

encounters with Chinese armies, the Chinese had been routed and their generals shamed. The Tibetans' only fear now was that the Chinese might have advanced more quickly than expected and that there would be insufficient time for all the Tibetan forces to cross the precarious rope bridge and form up in battle ranks. The columns of thousands advanced as rapidly as they could along the mountainside paths. In front were the cavalry—mainly non-Tibetans—followed by divisions of archers. The elite Tibetan spearmen, dressed from head to toe in fine chain mail of iron, brought up the rear.

They arrived at the bridge in the evening. As they rounded the bend of the road, Seg Lhaton heard the soldiers in front of him cry out in surprise. It was difficult to make out the bridge in fading light, but then he realized why: it was no longer there. On the opposite bank, only an arrow-shot away, stood a detachment of the Chinese army. They had just cut the bridge. Seg Lhaton and the Tibetan army had no choice but to retreat, giving up all hope of retaking Little Balur and Wakhan that year.

Seg Lhaton had finished his account, but his audience immediately asked what had happened. How had General Ko supplied his army? How had they crossed the river? How had the general persuaded Chinese troops to descend the Darkhot pass? Everyone knew the Chinese army's weakness in the mountains. How had they reached Little Balur and the Gilgit river so quickly?

General Ko, Seg Lhaton replied, was from Koguryo and a wily opponent. But how had he succeeded where three other Chinese generals had failed before him? His first tactic had been to divide his force of 10,000 men into three columns at their Sarikol base. These he sent to Sarhad along three different routes, so maintaining three supply lines. He also established another supply depot on the Amu Darya to the northwest.[28] The three columns met in August on the

northern banks of the river opposite the Tibetan camp.

Instead of being defeated by the spate waters spreading over the valley floor, the general made an offering to the river god to encourage his troops, and they crossed the river secretly and without difficulty a few miles downstream, out of sight of the Tibetan troops. From there they followed a path south up the mountainside, which had been found by a reconnaissance team sent the previous night, traveling parallel to the tributary valley where the main Tibetan force was encamped. After a few miles, they reached a spur from which there was a fairly easy descent to take the main Tibetan forces in the rear and by surprise. “The last thing we were expecting,” explained Seg Lhaton, “was an attack from the rear. We were forced back against our own palisades.” Meanwhile, another Chinese detachment engaged the Tibetans encamped on the southern bank of the river.

In pursuing the fleeing Tibetans, General Ko did not try to take a full force with him to Little Balur. He left behind the wounded, the weak, and the skeptical, and he pressed on at great speed to the Darkhot pass. He knew of the descent into the Gilgit valley and did not have great faith in the willingness of his troops to negotiate it without some inducement: most were not mountain men. He therefore chose ten reliable soldiers—all non-Chinese—and ordered them to ride ahead secretly, cross the pass, and disguise themselves as residents of the town on the other side. There they were to wait until they saw the general and his troops appear on the saddle of the pass. Then they were to ride up as if they were a delegation from the town and report that the townspeople had sent them to welcome the Chinese and that the bridge over the Gilgit had been cut by the townspeople to prevent a Tibetan counterattack.

The ruse worked. His soldiers, as the general predicted, were unwilling to descend into the valley but the delegation reassured them. The army advanced in optimistic spirits,

certain they had already won the war. Next, the general sent a party ahead to the town to capture the royal family and the chiefs of the kingdom. With the king and his entourage as prisoners, he entered the town unopposed and immediately executed the officials loyal to the Tibetans.

Then, without wasting any time, he dispatched an advance party of engineers to cut the bridge across the Gilgit river to the south. They had barely succeeded in their task before Seg Lhaton and the rest of the Tibetan army appeared in the dusk along the road on the far side. General Ko's speed, strategy, and guile had won the war.

One of Seg Lhaton's audience asked what happened to the king and the Tibetan queen of Little Balur. "They were sent to the Chinese capital where the king was given an honorary position in the palace guards." Seg Lhaton did not know what had happened to the queen. The slope near Sarhad by which General Ko's forces had gained the heights above the Tibetan army was fortified with a bastioned stone wall, several feet wide and faced with brick and brushwood, and 2,000 Chinese troops were left to garrison Little Balur (see figure 10).29 General Ko was richly rewarded by the emperor, and from then on Tibetan commanders treated him with more respect.

After the campaign of 747, Seg Lhaton and his fellow tribesmen from the Yarlung valley were allowed to go home for a brief period of leave before a tour of duty on the eastern front. It was 1,500 miles to their home south of Lhasa, and another 1,000 miles north to the next posting. They had been paid and given authorization to levy supplies on the journey.

Their route first took them south along the Gilgit river until it joined the Indus. The stages After that were relatively easy, despite the summer flood waters which at times made the lower roads impassable. They kept to the mountains through northern Kashmir, climbing the Indus river valley southeast into Tibet. The road then followed a succession of river valleys along the northern foothills of the Himalayas to

the Yarlung river. But Seg Lhaton did not have long with his family on their valley farm before he took the road north to his next posting. His armor and weapons had all been repaired and cleaned, and he had a string of fresh ponies. He was headed for the former stronghold of the Azha tribes, the area around the Koko-nor.

On another evening, Seg Lhaton was persuaded to relate his account of the Koko-nor campaign. All the soldiers at Miran knew the terrain around Koko-nor because most of them had passed through it on their way to Miran from Tibet. Seg Lhaton told how, on approaching the lake, he saw a mass of the large, polygonal, black yak-hair Tibetan tents, surrounded by tens of thousands of horses and livestock. The land around the lake was extremely fertile, and that summer the grass reached to the yaks' bellies so that all of the animals were becoming fat on their rich diet. The camp stretched as far as Seg Lhaton could see, and it took him some time to find his own division and set up camp.

FIGURE 10. The southwest corner of the Tibetan-built Kansir fort. (Photograph courtesy of Andy Miller.)

Many of the servants in the Tibetan camp were prisoners-of-war, among them Chinese and Uygurs. When first captured, all prisoners were kept in a large pit. The more important among them were questioned and sometimes tortured before being tattooed and assigned duties. Literate prisoners were appointed as interpreters and advisers and tattooed on the arm, whereas ordinary prisoners received face tattoos.30 Escapes were not uncommon, but it was a

long journey across the mountains to safety. (A century later, a Chinese officer who managed to escape After six years in captivity lost part of his foot from frostbite during his flight home.)[31] Those who were recaptured were flogged with a leather whip. The bodies of high-ranking prisoners on both sides who died in captivity were returned in coffins under the conditions of various treaties between Tibet and China. Neither Chinese nor Tibetan officials relished being sent to the enemy's capital: envoys were sometimes taken hostage and used as counters in the continual peace negotiations.

When Seg Lhaton arrived in 749, an expectant air filled the camp. Spies returning from the Chinese army camps on the Yellow river had confirmed that the Khotanese-Turkic military governor, Geshu Han, was mustering his forces. The Tibetan commanders wanted to send more troops to the west to retake the Pamir kingdoms. Since the Chinese victory there, Tibetan soldiers had succeeded in disrupting the supply routes from Kashmir of the Chinese garrison in Little Balur, and they had even encroached back into Wakhan. But a full-scale attack to retake these two kingdoms was delayed because of the need to concentrate Tibetan troops on the eastern front where Chinese aggression was escalating. In fact, later that year General Ko again marched west to confront Tibetan forces in the Pamir. And again he was successful. Seg Lhaton did not take part in that battle, but there were veterans at Miran who had.

Geshu Han raised a special army for the attack on Iron Blade, naming it the Divine Prestige Army. It consisted of 63,000 men.[32] He was determined to succeed against the Tibetans and had drawn men from four commands. They were battle-hardened soldiers. Many of the divisions were Turks, loyal to the Chinese but especially pleased to be fighting under a Turkic general. The appointment of non-Chinese generals for the frontier commands was a recent and deliberate policy decision.[33] The Chinese chief minister

advised the emperor that they were better soldiers and had only military, rather than political, ambitions. Apart from the Koguryo general Ko, who commanded the western regions, and the Khotanese-Turkic general Geshu Han in the Hexi corridor, the northwest was commanded by two Turkic-Sogdian generals, Rokshan and his cousin.34 All proved their worth in battle, but six years later Rokshan showed that being non-Chinese did not preclude him from having ambitions beyond the military sphere. He staged a rebellion, toppled the emperor, and took China into a protracted and costly civil war. But all this still lay in the future.

Seg Lhaton described to his audience the first confrontation between the two armies. The Tibetan army drummers started their beat as the two armies advanced. The drums of the Chinese side grew steadily louder as the front lines approached each other. It was a fine clear day. Iron Blade fortress rose behind the ranks of Tibetan soldiers. It was heavily guarded, but the main battle was to take place on the plains below. There were no trees to obscure the view. As the two armies lined up in opposing ranks, they both sent lone horsemen to gallop up and down near each other's lines in an attempt to provoke them.

As usual, the Tibetans put non-Tibetan cavalry in the vanguard; both sides used foreign divisions as battle-fodder. Then came the lightly armored and mounted archers, with quivers of poisoned arrows that they let loose on the Chinese soldiers. In their iron chain mail, the ranks of Tibetan foot soldiers in the rear were almost impregnable to Chinese swords and arrows.35 Only the long, steel-tipped arrows of the Chinese archers could hope to pierce it. Each Tibetan foot soldier carried a sword, a lance, daggers, and slingshots.36 The Chinese were equipped with similar weapons. Behind the lines lay the heavy artillery—a row of catapults. Chinese archers made liberal use of fire arrows, and some of the foot soldiers carried heavy lances tipped

with combustible material. These they set alight and projected from flexible bamboo poles into the Tibetan forces.37

The battle continued day After day in the bright sunlight of the high plateau. The tall grass was soon trampled by the thousands of men and horses, and the air was thick with dust and death. Still the Chinese could not break the Tibetan lines. As one soldier fell another would replace him. A Tibetan fatigue-relieving corps collected the soldiers near to collapse and took them back behind the lines.38 There the soldiers were revived and then ordered back to the front. The dead and the wounded were collected by both sides from the field of battle every night.

After several days of fighting with thousands of casualties among his soldiers, the Chinese general Geshu Han called his deputies into his tent. He laid down an ultimatum: he would have them all executed unless they broke the Tibetan lines and took Iron Blade fortress within three days. Seg Lhaton and his fellow soldiers did not hear of this until later, but they noticed the renewed determination of the enemy troops. Although line on line of Chinese soldiers fell, the pressure became too great for the Tibetans. Eventually they were forced back into the fortress. Now the Chinese sent battering rams to knock down the gates and catapults to hurl boulders to break down the walls. Toxic smoke bombs, made from powdered lime and arsenic stuff ed in thin earthenware pots with broken matting, were lobbed into the heart of the fort.39 The Tibetan archers continued to do their work, but still the Chinese advanced.

At last the fortress was taken but at a tremendous cost. In the final Chinese advance, the Tibetan general and four hundred of his men were captured. The rest of the Tibetan army retreated south, leaving the bloody land behind. A Chinese poet expressed what must have been a common feeling on both sides:

Kites and ravens peck men's guts,
Fly with them dangling from their beaks
And hang them high on boughs of barren trees.
The troops lie mud-smeared in the grass
And the generals acted all in vain.
Now I see that weapons are the tools of evil.
The Sage will only use them when he cannot do otherwise.[40]

Seg Lhaton finished his story. He did not reveal to his audience that he had lost his taste for battle After this, though he had to fight in several more encounters against the Chinese before being posted to Miran. He was only prevented from returning home for good by loyalty and fear of reprisals—deserters were executed. He could not read Chinese, but he may have sympathized with the sentiments of the many anti-war poems produced by Chinese poets in reaction to the frontier campaigns:

I have learned that bearing males is bad, but bearing girls is good.
If you bear a girl you can marry her to a neighbour
But a boy will end up buried out on the prairie grass.

Have you not seen on Koko-nor's shores
White bones from ancient days that no one gathers?

The new ghosts are tormented with rage
The older ghosts simply weep.
When the sky grows shadowed and rain pours down
You hear their voices wailing.[41]

Many more evenings were spent in the desert fort, talking of former battles and exchanging stories, before Seg Lhaton finally received orders that he could return home and was now exempted from further military service. He had been fighting since he was fifteen. It was not unusual to see men of fifty or older in battle, but Seg Lhaton had incurred several injuries that made active service difficult. During his

brief home leaves, he had married and become a father, but his wife and sons had done most of the farm work over the past two decades. He consulted a local astrologer to chose a good day to begin his journey, packed his belongings, and set off south for the Kunlun mountains. He was not sorry to leave the fort at Miran; it had been a poor home.

A long journey through a landscape of memories lay ahead of him. He traveled quickly, from one Tibetan camp to another, across the great grazing grounds of the Tsaidam basin to Koko-nor, now back in Tibetan hands. There the memories were especially bitter. He rode around the former fields of war, recalling the battle of long ago. The new grass showed no trace of those bloody days; only a few rusty, broken weapons were left as a grim reminder. Before he left, he pulled up some roots of licorice to take back for his daughter-in-law's stomach cramps.42 Her husband was also away on military service in Central Asia. Seg Lhaton had been fortunate to have survived twenty-five years of fighting. Who knew if his son would be so lucky?

THREE

The Horseman’s Tale

KUTLUG, 790–792

A green-eyed Uygur goshawk treads his brocaded
gauntlet.
With piebald horse and white ermine furs
He comes and goes in the three markets, but
knows no one;
Throwing down his gold-handled whip, he ascends
the tower of wine.

XUE FENG, “Xia shao nian,” ninth century AD[1]

IT WAS 790 and the beginning of the short steppe summer when the land is all too briefly green and the sky a constant, unrelenting blue, a respite from the grey and white of winter’s snow-laden clouds and frost-bitten earth. The camels and horses of the caravan crossing the steppe numbered in their thousands, but to the horseman approaching from afar, at the head of a herd of ponies, they were barely a speck in the rolling landscape.

The horseman Kutlug was a Uygur Turk, with a characteristically broad face, thick eyelashes, and deep-set green eyes.[2] His language, Uygur, was related to modern-day Turkish.[3] He was dressed in a short blue tunic with narrow sleeves, and trousers tucked into soft leather boots. A dagger

hung from his belt.4 His ponies had the blood of tarpans (*Equus przewalskii*), age-old travelers of the Eurasian steppe (see figure 11). They had lived in this land since the Pleistocene era and were well adapted to its rigors.5 The tarpan pony had a large head and a distinctive mane that stood up in summer, though in the winter both its mane and hair grew long and shaggy to ward off the bitter cold of the steppes. Kutlug's herd of ponies comprised several hundred head, and with it he was joining the larger caravan that he could see in the distance. The caravan was an embassy headed for the Chinese capital by way of a trading post on the Uygur-Chinese border. There the horses would be sold to representatives of the Chinese government.

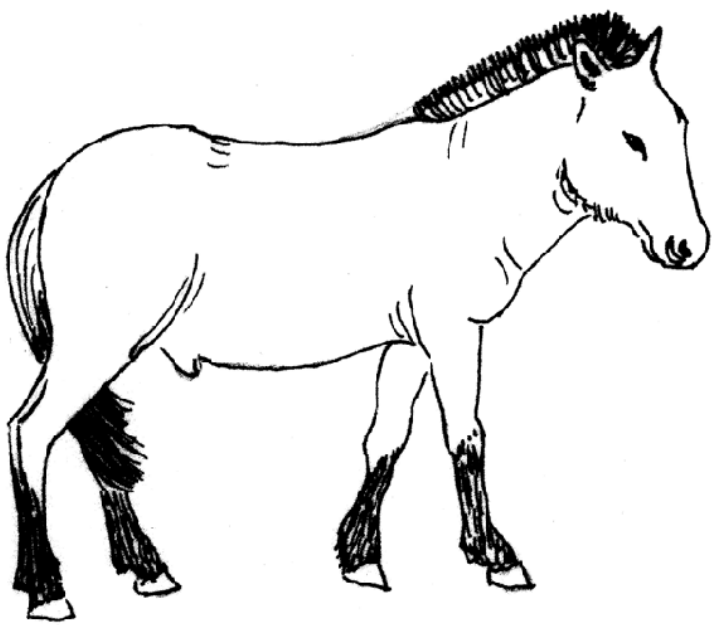

FIGURE 11. The tarpan, *Equus przewalskii*, with its erect mane but no forelock. (Drawing by author.)

The Uygurs were a confederation of Turkic tribes, peoples of the steppe, some of whom had migrated farther west to

form the Khazar and Bulgar powers; others would later settle in Anatolia.6 They had controlled the eastern steppe a century previously in alliance with the Chinese, but a revolt by other Turkic tribes had driven them out, and many had fled to the borders of China.7 Since then, the eastern Turkic empire had disintegrated, and, following a brief period of control by another Turkic group and a decade of war, the Uygurs had regained control.8

The Chinese Tang dynasty believed the Turks to be descendants of the Xiongnu, and a Turkic origin legend tells of a young boy injured by the enemy and subsequently thrown into a marsh to die. He survives, however, and has intercourse with a she-wolf, After which they take refuge in a cave and the wolf gives birth to ten sons. Several generations later, their descendants—the Turks—emerge from the cave and defeat the resident tribes, interpreted as a reference to the rise of the Turks in 552. The Turkic standard bore a golden wolf's head, and every year the Turkic khagan offered a sacrifice at the ancestral cavern.9

After the Uygurs' success on the battlefield, they moved south from their base on the Selenga river, seizing control of the land as far east as the borders of China and south to the Tianshan mountains. Contrary to nomad tradition, the Uygurs then built a walled capital called Ordu-Balik on the Orkhon river in the north of their new empire, established in 744.10 The Uygur khagan kept a traditional felt tent erected on the roof of his palace, perhaps to remind him of his nomadic origins. The tent, covered in gold, was a permanent structure.11 From it, the khagan could see his domain stretching away beyond the city walls. For miles around, the land was cultivated by Uygur farmers. Sogdian and Chinese architects had already been at work designing fine buildings for his city and had been directed to build another town, named "Rich Town," on the Selenga river to the west.12 Kutlug's grandfather had been skeptical about these

changes, and Kutlug remembered his constant boast: “When we Uygurs fight our neighbours, we generally destroy several thousand of their cavalry with but five hundred of our men. It is as if we were simply sweeping up leaves.”13

At first, the new Uygur khaganate looked to be a better neighbor to the Chinese, both states being united against the Tibetan threat to their respective borders. During the late 740s and the early 750s, Chinese forces under the leadership of Generals Ko and Geshu Han seemed to be gaining the upper hand over the Tibetans. A third foreign general, a Turkic-Sogdian named Rokshan,14 had been less successful in his northern campaigns against the Kitans but remained a favorite of the Chinese emperor Xuanzong and most especially of the emperor’s consort, the Lady Yang. In 751, following one of Rokshan’s defeats, she adopted him as her son, and scandalous stories were soon circulating in Chang’an’s teahouses about her more than maternal affections.15 Matters were not helped when they both took private lessons in the Sogdian whirling dance, considered by conservative Chinese officials to be highly immoral.16 Rumors also circulated that Lady Yang sent Rokshan presents given to her by her husband, such as the ten pieces of the best camphor from Borneo, presented as tribute by a delegation from that country.17 She demanded use of the Bright Camel Envoy to carry the camphor, even though this was normally reserved for military emergencies.18

But she retained the favor of the emperor, who was, by this time, no longer young. When the emperor first became infatuated with Lady Yang, Rokshan had given him a hundred tiny red pills made from passion flower aromatic and advised him to place one in his mouth every evening before entering her bedroom so as “to help his passions develop into excitement and the strength of his sinews not to flag.”19 Lady Yang knew all the ways to keep the emperor happy, not just the sexual ones. She performed Central Asian dances in

a multicolored gauze blouse and feathered skirt in the style of the legendary immortal ladies of the west.[20] She was also an adept musician:

> The copper tongues in the mouth organ resound in the cool bamboo tubes,
> As slowly she plays new tunes with her jade-like fingers.
> Her eyes look at me invitingly—as autumn waves, swiftly changing.
> We knew the “rain” and “clouds” in the intimacy of the curtained chamber,
> Where our passions united us. Now, After the feats, how empty is the room!
> There is nothing left but to lose myself in dreams of spring.[21]

When the emperor was losing at the game of double-sixes, she would release one of her pets, her Samarkand lapdog or her white cockatoo, and drive them in the direction of the gaming board, so distracting his opponent.[22] Every year, they would go to hot springs just outside the city that the emperor had developed specially so that he could enjoy watching her bathe; she was reported to have had skin of snowy whiteness and was plump, as demanded by the fashion of the day. The emperor was totally infatuated.

Later that year, Rokshan lost most of his army in yet another battle against the Kitans, but he retained his position and, in 754, was even promoted, much to the consternation of Geshu Han, one of his many critics. But feeling against Rokshan was mounting in Chang’an, fostered by the chief minister, Lady Yang’s cousin. Having refused orders to attend the emperor at the capital and knowing that in the chief minister he had a bitter enemy, Rokshan decided to take matters into his own hands. In December 755, he rebelled.[23]

Initially, he met with success. Within little more than a month, he had taken the secondary capital of China, Luoyang, two hundred miles east of Chang’an. To stem the tide of rebellion, the emperor recalled all the military

garrisons on China's northwest borders. This withdrawal of troops was to signal the beginning of the end of China's influence in the Tarim basin.

Rokshan spent the winter of 755–56 consolidating his gains and driving farther south, but then he began to suffer setbacks as local prefects returned to the loyalist cause and his armies endured defeats. The rebels were weakening, and when the emperor ordered Geshu Han to attack them, he refused, arguing that his troops held an impregnable position defending the capital that would be foolhardy to surrender. Unwisely, the emperor insisted, and Geshu Han had no choice but to comply. In the sixth month of 756, the general's fears were borne out: his advancing army was ambushed and destroyed, and Geshu Han was forced to surrender to Rokshan by his own men.

When news of the defeat reached the emperor, he promptly fled the capital with Lady Yang and headed for the safety of the mountainous southwest. But the troops in his escort blamed the Lady Yang for Rokshan's rise and threatened to mutiny. The emperor could only appease them by ordering Lady Yang's strangulation. She was buried at the site of her execution, and the imperial party continued their flight. Meanwhile, the heir apparent had fled north to the border regions, and there he usurped the throne, declaring himself emperor in the summer of 756. The Chinese empire, at the height of its power only a few years before, was now in disarray.

The new emperor lost no time in sending embassies to the Uygur court at Ordu-Balik to plead for their help against the rebels.24 The main Uygur contingent of 4,000 men arrived in mid-757 under the leadership of the khagan's eldest son. By this time, Rokshan had been assassinated by a fellow rebel who had then assumed command. The Uygur army prepared for battle, and Chang'an was retaken by the end of the year.

In return for their aid, the Uygurs had demanded the right to plunder the city if they were successful, but the Chinese chief minister persuaded them to wait until Luoyang too was retaken. The Uygur army did so in the same month, and many of the rebels surrendered. Then the Uygurs exercised their right to plunder Luoyang, and for the next three days the city was the scene of carnage.25

The rebellion continued to simmer for several more years, in the course of which two more of its leaders were assassinated and its armies took Luoyang a second time. On that occasion, the rebels themselves tried to enlist the support of the Uygurs. When, in desperation, the new emperor sent his heir apparent and three top officials to plead his cause, the Uygur khagan demanded that they perform the ceremonial dance expected of all subordinates attending the khagan. The heir apparent refused, and both he and the three officials were beaten, two of them so badly that they died the same day.26 Nevertheless, the Uygurs decided to support the Chinese and, in late 762, again drove the rebels out of Luoyang and again plundered the city. Kutlug's grandfather was among the veterans of this campaign, and he often boasted of how frightened the Chinese had been of the Uygur forces. Other veterans spoke of the tremendous riches of Luoyang and of the young women there, many of whom were raped and killed by the victorious soldiers. Some residents took refuge in Buddhist buildings, but these were burned to the ground with the people still inside. Much was destroyed but even more was loaded onto camels and taken out of the city and across the steppe to Ordu-Balik.

The Uygur army camped around the city in tents, seizing supplies from local farmers and granaries until nothing was left for the local populace. People fled into the surrounding hills, where they survived as best they could. The veterans

did not tell of the terrible famine that forced people to eat soil and the bark of trees while the soldiers grew fat on their plunder. The city, once a rival to Chang'an for its broad tree-lined avenues, fine buildings, and bustling lanes, lay in charred ruins.

As a further reward for their services, the Uygurs demanded that border markets be established for the trade of horses and silk.[27] From this time on, the Uygurs and the Chinese had an uneasy alliance. The Uygurs regularly brought herds of thousands of ponies for sale to the Chinese government at a fixed price of forty bolts of silk for each, though a pony could be bought for as little as one bolt elsewhere.[28] The ponies were euphemistically called "Uygur tribute to the court" by the Chinese imperial annalists but were really Chinese payment for Uygur military assistance and security against future Uygur attack. The Uygurs benefited most from these transactions, though the Chinese limited their financial losses by regularly defaulting on payment.

While in Luoyang, the Uygur khagan met a group of Manichaean priests from Samarkand and was himself converted. On his return to Ordu-Balik, he ordered the propagation of the new religion throughout his kingdom, though many of his subjects, among them Kutlug's family, retained their traditional beliefs. Manichaean teachers were dispatched throughout the land, and the khagan decreed that one in ten of his subjects would be responsible for the spiritual education of the other nine. Monasteries were established, even as far south as Dzungaria, and the white-robed Manichaean monks became a common sight.[29] At first, they were full of missionary zeal, burning all the statues they found of the local gods and spirits. Kutlug's own tribal leader flirted with Manichaeism for a time: groups of priests would hold day-long prayer sessions in his tent. But Kutlug's family would have nothing to do with the new religion, and his

grandmother did not lose her profound belief in Umay, the mother goddess.30 Even their neighbors, who professed a belief in the new religion, would attend traditional religious ceremonies and make their offerings and requests along with everyone else. It was not long before many of the new converts were lapsing, reverting back to agricultural labor in defiance of monastic rules, returning to their traditional meat diet, and making offerings to local gods and spirits. There was also considerable antipathy toward the Manichaean Sogdians among some of the khagan's courtiers.

However, Sogdian influence extended beyond the spiritual: they were the merchants of the Silk Road and also fine builders, craftsmen, and agriculturists. Sogdian architects and artisans helped transform the capital into a thriving commercial center with metallurgists, potters, engravers, blacksmiths, sculptors, stonemasons, and weavers. Many Uygurs now abandoned their nomadic lifestyle altogether, whereas others farmed in the summer but still traveled with their livestock to the winter pastures. In addition to their Kökturk script, the Uygurs also adopted the Sogdian script, an alphabet of seventeen letters with two special characters. Sogdian is an Iranian language, and therefore its alphabet was not perfectly adapted to Uygur, a Turkic language, but it sufficed. The Uygurs in turn passed the script on to later inhabitants of the steppes, the Mongols.31

Sogdians also played a political role. In 779, they urged the khagan to mount an invasion of China while its court was in mourning for its emperor Daizong. The khagan's nephew disagreed with the policy and, failing to win his argument by persuasion, arranged for his uncle's murder along with that of his Sogdian advisers.32 For several years thereafter, the Sogdians were less welcome at court.33

Sogdians traveled with the Uygurs on their frequent embassies to the Chinese capital, and many stayed and

settled there and in other Chinese cities. Some married Chinese women or took Chinese concubines.[34] During the last part of the eighth century, they had an excuse to stay because the Tarim routes to the east of Sogdia were not passable, being held by the Tibetans, and during their residence in Chang'an they received Chinese government aid that amounted to half a million strings of copper coins annually. One Chinese minister suggested that the merchants be granted status as Chinese subjects and given jobs; although his proposal was not implemented, the aid was ended.[35] In 780, a Uygur embassy was ordered to take both Uygur and Sogdian merchants back with them to Ordu-Balik. From there, the Sogdians could travel through Uygur-held territory almost to the borders of Sogdia. Fearing that their Chinese wives and concubines would not be granted permission to leave, the merchants smuggled them out in sacks loaded on camels. The caravan stayed three months on the border, just north of the Yellow river, waiting for the traveling season. Since they were still in Chinese territory, their rations were supplied by the Chinese government. The unusually large bill soon came to official notice, the caravan was searched, and the stowaways discovered.[36]

The story did not have a happy ending. The Sogdian merchants were reluctant to go to Ordu-Balik because of the recent murder of the pro-Sogdian khagan and his advisers. They therefore sought a secret agreement with the Chinese general accompanying them whereby they would assist in massacring the Uygurs in the embassy in exchange for being allowed to stay in China. The Chinese general thought that, on the whole, it would be less troublesome to massacre both the Uygurs and the Sogdians, and he duly sought permission from the emperor, arguing that this would be a means of diminishing the influence of both. When his request was refused for the third time, he engineered a breach of protocol to provide him with the necessary excuse. He then arranged

a great banquet, wined and dined his guests into a helpless state, and had them killed. Two Uygurs were spared and sent to Ordu-Balik to report the event, and the Chinese wives and concubines were returned to Chang'an. The Uygur khagan took revenge in characteristic fashion: instead of murdering the Chinese envoys sent to accompany the coffins of the merchants back to Ordu-Balik, he kept them waiting in the capital for two months before granting them an audience. We must presume that they were by now in a state of some anxiety. The khagan then demanded payment in full of all outstanding debts on the purchase of horses, amounting to two million strings of copper coins, suggesting that the Chinese were inveterate defaulters. The Chinese emperor realized he had escaped lightly and paid the debt, using state reserves of gold, silver, and silk.37

A Chinese imperial decree of 779 had ordered non-Chinese to wear their ethnic dress in China so as to be distinctive, but the Uygurs stood out anyway.38 Groups of young men would ride into Chang'an's Western Market in search of a tea shop, the latest fashion, or simply some excitement. Market officials complained about the Uygurs' loutish behavior and their harassment of traders, many of whom were in debt to Uygur moneylenders. It had been illegal for Chinese subjects to borrow money from Uygurs ever since a famous general's son had defaulted on a loan.39 The Uygur moneylender had taken the case to law and a scandal had ensued, with the general dismissed from his post. The law had little effect, however, and Uygur moneylenders continued to thrive for at least another century.

Although Chinese horse breeding was sophisticated, there was always a demand for more horses for the military and elite.40 By the fifth century, the steppe people had already interbred the tarpan pony to create larger, faster horses, similar to those found around Nisa and Merv, sometimes called the Turkmen horse. They had been praised by

Alexander the Great when his armies met them in battle and had the characteristics of the Ferghanan horse described by the second-century Chinese envoy Zhang Qian.41

As China expanded its territory to include the steppe pasturelands to the northwest, traditional home of many of the horses, it acquired more suitable pastureland for breeding. The Chinese preferred horses with Turkmen ancestry to the tarpan pony, but the herds always contained a mixture. Turkmen blood gave the tarpan a smaller head and flowing mane and a ridge of muscle on either side of the backbone, which made bareback riding more comfortable.42 By that time, however, Chinese soldiers and horsemen rode on high saddles with stirrups.43

The herds were always vulnerable to disease as well as looting by the Turks and Tibetans who made frequent raids across the borders. In one particularly bad epidemic, the Chinese lost 180,000 horses, causing a minister to proclaim: “Horses are the military preparedness of the country; if Heaven takes this preparedness away, the state will totter to a fall.”44 When the Chinese Tang dynasty came to power in 618, only 5,000 horses were left in the imperial pastures. By mid-century, their numbers had increased to over 700,000, divided among eight pasturelands.45 After Rokshan’s rebellion, however, Tibetan raids on the pastures increased, and the Chinese came to rely on the Uygurs for replacement mounts—though they did not need all that were sent, especially as many of them were old nags, but it was an indication of Chinese fear of Uygur military strength that they continued to buy them.46

The Uygurs were consummate horsemen, and, despite the more sedentary lifestyle of some of the population After the founding of their empire, their equine skills were not neglected. Kutlug was a typical horseman. He knew how to pick the best pony for each season and job, skills he had been

taught as a child. For summertime, it was essential to choose a mount with a thin hide that had not been worked too hard in the previous months, since even the toughest ponies found the unrelenting heat difficult, and a good-natured mount was a great asset. The best pony for winter, by contrast, had a thick hide, long hair, and a round stomach with legs that rose straight from the ground, showing no hint of splaying. For lassoing, a short-bodied mount was required, stout but swift. Kutlug and his peers had been riding since before they could walk and were more at home on horseback than on foot.

In the summer of 790, Kutlug was riding one of his favorite mounts as he approached the large caravan across the steppe. The horses already in the caravan had been taken from the summer grazing grounds near the Uygur capital. Kutlug was bringing several hundred head more from the southern grazing grounds in Dzungaria to join them. There were many old nags among them, and others that would barely make the journey, so Kutlug carried various horse medicines with him, including a recipe that helped relieve colic caused by cold water from desert wells. The mixture contained white turmeric or zedoary from India.47 Kutlug knew that the Chinese overseer would complain about the state of the horses but also that he could do nothing about it. The overseer would pay for them all, and the Uygurs would return with bolts of fine silks for trade with their western neighbors. The horse trade was a good opportunity for the Uygurs to get rid of poor stock, and if horses died en route, then they could always be eaten.

Kutlug's family lived in the south of the Uygur khaganate, beyond the Altai mountains in the great steppe basin now known as Dzungaria. They belonged to one of the many tribes that were united under the khagan, but each of which owed allegiance to its own leader, the totok.48 The khagan was drawn from one of the tribes. Several other non-Uygur Turkic tribes also offered allegiance to the khagan, and

frontline troops were usually chosen from among these. Dzungaria had excellent pasturage and shelter for vast herds of camels, horses, yaks, and sheep, and when one area of pasture was cropped, Kutlug and his family would pack up their tents and belongings, load them onto camels and horse-driven carts, and move on. The richer members of the tribe had at least two tents or yurts, substantial round dwellings made of thick felt supported by a collapsible wooden frame, with a smoke hole in the center of the domed roof.

Felt played an important role in Uygur life. It was used not just for tents but also for saddle pads, boot linings, clothes, and furnishings, and new batches were made every autumn. A piece of old felt, called “the mother,” was laid on the ground and soaked with water.[49] Three layers of sheep wool and a layer of grass were placed on top, each soaked in turn, and then the bundle was rolled up tightly inside hides that had also been soaked and fastened with leather straps. More water was poured in at either end, and ropes were tied to the bundle and to two horsemen on opposite sides. They both stood their horses next to the bundle so that the rope was slack, and then one walked his horse away until his rope was taut and then dragged the bundle along the ground until the other horseman’s rope was taut. This continued, first one way and then the other, perhaps thirty or forty times. The whole soggy bundle was then unwrapped, unrolled, and the grass removed. The resulting piece of rough felt, formed from the amalgam of the layers of sheep wool, was called “the daughter.” But the process was not yet complete. Next, the daughter felt was rolled up with another three layers of wool and the process repeated. The resulting felt was soaked again and laid against the side of a yurt to dry. Different types and grades of wool were used to make different qualities of felt. The best was made from the downy fleece of the unshorn sheep collected by hand.

Kutlug had spent most of his life with his family in

Dzungaria. He considered the tribal head, the totok, as his leader; the khagan was a distant figure. The totok was responsible for raising an army, and all males between the ages of fifteen and fifty could be called up. To hone their military skills, Kutlug and his fellows played many games and sports, among them archery competitions in which they would ride at full speed with the reins between their teeth and then let off a volley of arrows at various targets. They also went on hunting expeditions into the mountains in search of wolves and deer. But Kutlug's greatest joy was his goshawk. He and his fellow tribesmen would catch young hawks using decoys and nets dyed with *toghruga,* a yellow-brown dye from the bark of the black poplar, which meant the nets could not been seen against the earth.50 Or they might raid nests for chicks, fitting them with jesses, leashes, and leather hoods and training them to catch small mammals and birds (see figure 12). A group of men oft en hunted their hawks together, riding with their birds and hounds into the Altai mountains and taking watch on a circle of peaks that afforded a clear view of the valley below. As soon as prey was sighted, their birds were released.51 A group of eagles, which were also used for falconry, could take a wolf this way.52

Kutlug was excited when he learned that he had been chosen to join the embassy bound for Chang'an, for even members of the leading families in Ordu-Balik vied with each other for the opportunity to travel to China. Kutlug had visited neither the Uygur nor the Chinese capitals, but stories told by veterans of the wealth of Chang'an, and more recent accounts from fellow tribesmen who had been on earlier embassies, had aroused his curiosity. They spoke of all the goods in Chang'an's Western Market and of how they had ridden in on horseback and "persuaded" cowering merchants to make presents of their wares. In the wineshops and teahouses, they were entertained by beautiful Kuchean girls,

and Afterward they had visited the famous courtesan quarter by the Eastern Market.[53] This abutted a rich residential area, and they laughed when they recalled how Chinese scholars had veered off down side streets when they saw the Uygur youths approaching. The Uygurs considered themselves masters of the city.[54]

Kutlug and his herd caught up with the large caravan and settled into its rhythm. Its progress was slow, its speed dictated by the plodding camels and the need to graze the enormous herds. As soon as suitable pasturage was reached each day, the camels were unloaded, tents erected, and cooking fires prepared, while the horses and camels were left to graze on the thin grass that covered the rocky steppe. The Uygurs carried noodles and dried fruit with them, but their main food was meat. Mare's milk was also used extensively, to make butter and cheese or fermented to make a slightly alcoholic drink that could in turn be distilled into clear liquor. When there was no firewood, they cooked with camel or yak dung.[55]

FIGURE 12. Man in *hufu* (foreigners' robe), with falcon and saluki dog, from a mural in an imperial Tang dynasty tomb near Chang'an. (Drawing by author.)

The caravan was in high spirits as it approached the Chinese border and trading post, though also vigilant: there were oft en Tibetan raids in this area. Kutlug learned that not everyone would be allowed to continue to Chang'an. The main party of high officials and members of the khagan's family, including two princesses, carried letters for the emperor and further "gift s." Kutlug hoped to accompany them, but the Chinese border guards always limited the number of Uygurs allowed into the capital. They had been

particularly strict since an incident involving a previous embassy in which drunken Uygur youths, in a rage at some perceived slight, had tried to hack down the gate to the Court for Receiving Foreign Envoys in the Imperial City.[56] The Uygur men looked forward to a few encounters with their Chinese counterparts: they considered the Chinese scholar-official, with his feminine demeanor and refusal to carry arms, a contemptible sort of person, a victim to bully. Such encounters did not always stop at verbal abuse; drunken brawls were commonplace, and Chinese men were murdered by Uygurs in 774 and 775 in Chang'an.[57] The head of the Uygur community refused to allow the murderers to be punished, and the Chinese governor did not dare enforce the law.

In the event, to his disappointment, Kutlug was not among those allowed to proceed to Chang'an. But while still at the border, he heard disturbing news about Dzungaria, his homeland. Uygur and Chinese forces had been defeated at the Tianshan city of Beshbalik in southern Dzungaria by Tibetan-led forces. The Uygurs had retreated north across the Gobi desert to Ordu-Balik, and the Chinese had fled south over the Tianshan to Kocho.[58] A joint counterattack was planned for the autumn, and orders had been sent to all the totoks to call every adult man to arms. Kutlug started back for his homeland in northern Dzungaria immediately to prepare for the campaign.

The problems in Beshbalik had a long history, dating back to Rokshan's rebellion in China. Just as Uygur forces had gained dominance in China After helping to suppress the rebellion, so the Tibetans had profited from the Chinese empire's increasing weakness, though not immediately. In the same year as the start of the Chinese rebellion, in 755, the Tibetan emperor had been assassinated by two of his ministers. However, a new emperor was installed in 756, by which time China had recalled most of the troops stationed in

its western garrisons, and the Tibetans lost no time in advancing north. By the late eighth century, they controlled most of the Tarim. Only a few unsupported Chinese garrisons remained. Beshbalik, called Beiting by the Chinese, was one of these. The direct route into China from Beshbalik led southeast through the Hexi corridor, but this area was also controlled by the Tibetans. Several envoys from Beshbalik had tried to find an alternative route, but it was a decade before the first arrived safely in China, having traveled north to Ordu-Balik and then southeast to the Uygur-Chinese border. This was in 781, and since then all supplies and messengers had used this very circuitous route, for which privilege the Uygurs exacted a large transit toll.59

Finding their resources drained by these constant raids and by combined reparations to the Uygurs for past assistance, the Chinese actively sought peace with the Tibetans. A treaty was negotiated and signed in 783, freeing Chinese troops to deal with another internal rebellion.60 The settlement negotiated between the two powers promised Tibetan assistance against the rebels and Chinese agreement to cede Beshbalik, but neither side stuck to its terms, and in retaliation the Tibetans arranged the assassination of two senior Chinese generals. A third, invited to a negotiating session that was no more than an excuse for an ambush, narrowly escaped. The Tibetan attack on Beshbalik was further revenge for the broken treaty.

The Tibetan attack marked the culmination of several years of covert operations in the area. Beshbalik was populated largely by non-Uygur Turks, and the plains surrounding the city by tens of thousands of Shatuo Turks.61 The two peoples lived in peace with each other, but the Uygurs to the north made themselves very unpopular. Armed groups of young Uygurs made regular raids into the area, seizing clothes, food, and livestock. With few men and no recourse to reinforcements, the Chinese forces were

powerless to retaliate. Moreover, the Uygurs were supposed to be their allies.

The Tibetans had spies in the town who reported the rising level of popular discontent among the Turkic residents, and the Tibetans fomented it, secretly offering Turkic leaders their full support should the townspeople decide to rebel. Finally, in 789, the Tibetans judged the mood to be favorable and invaded across the Tianshan, capturing Beshbalik in January 790. Uygur and Chinese forces reunited for the first time since their battles against the rebels in China in 763, and the city was briefly retaken, but in the summer the residents went over to the Tibetans, and the Uygur and Chinese armies were both forced to retreat.

The Uygurs and the Chinese had much to fear from the Tibetans. Tibetan raiding parties made regular incursions deep into both their territories, and in 763 Tibetan soldiers had even briefly captured the Chinese capital. The new, combined Uygur-China army that Kutlug was to join had been formed to face a common enemy, but it was not clear quite who was helping whom. The Uygurs had more to lose. Beshbalik was the only buffer between them and the Tibetan emperor. The Chinese regarded Beshbalik merely as an impotent outpost, a vestige of their former control of the Tarim. The relative size of the two forces reflected this disparity: the Uygurs called up every adult man, and their forces numbered over 10,000, whereas the Chinese contributed only 2,000 men.

Kutlug rode his string of horses back to Dzungaria without stopping. It was late summer by the time he arrived. The totok of his tribe had been summoned to Ordu-Balik, but the main forces of his army were training on the plains and preparing their horses and weapons for battle. The same scene was repeated throughout the Uygur empire as the tribal leaders called their men to arms. Kutlug gathered his armor, weapons, and best horses and joined his fellows in

their maneuvers. The northern and eastern tribes converged on the capital and marched south in early autumn. They were joined by other forces en route, Kutlug's being the last, and then they marched south as a combined force under the generalship of the Uygur chief minister, eager to avenge the earlier defeat at the hands of the Tibetans. Messengers were sent ahead to tell the Chinese soldiers of their approach, and, instead of entering Beshbalik from the north, the direct route, the general took his army in a wide sweep to the south, across the Tianshan to Kocho, where the Chinese forces joined them. By now, some of the Uygur forces had marched for almost a thousand miles.

The Uygurs considered themselves more than a match for the cumbersome Tibetan cavalry. Their bows were strengthened with horn and sinew, and their wooden arrows were flighted so as to produce a loud whistling sound to intimidate the enemy. The Chinese infantry were equipped with crossbows with leather-flighted arrows, and with longbows whose steel-headed arrows could pierce Tibetan armor. The Tibetan infantry were the main threat. Heavily armed and encased in armor, they were known for their bravery under attack. But the Tibetan army was also reinforced with Turkic soldiers, rebellious former subjects of the Uygurs, who were excellent cavalrymen.

The generals wore swords with hilts and scabbards mounted with silver, gold, and precious stones. Chinese alchemical theory held that the finest swords were a combination of female and male essences, yin and yang. To produce them, the bellows had to be worked by a virgin girl and boy. In ancient times, swords had been made in pairs—male and female. Legend spoke of such magical swords as dragon spirits and producers of lightning that would even cut through jade. Chinese artisans producing swords without imperial authorization were subject to severe punishment, and trade in weapons across China's borders was

prohibited.62

From Kocho, After the Chinese contingent had joined them, Kutlug and his fellow soldiers marched north, back across the Tianshan. The Tibetan army was waiting for them on the plain below the walled city of Beshbalik, and both sides took up their positions. The next day, the standard bearers, trumpeters, and drummers led their respective armies into battle. Each day the scene was one of a tangled mass of men, horses, and weapons. Each evening, when the armies retreated behind their lines, those who had fallen were left behind. The Uygur and Chinese forces could make no headway against the Tibetan lines, and as the battle progressed they grew weak and dispirited. Then the Tibetan lines began to advance. Kutlug was caught up in the tumult of horses and men trying to flee, their commanders behind the lines slashing at their own men in an attempt to frighten them back into battle as the gray mass of the iron-clad Tibetan infantry relentlessly rolled forward across the plain like a great tidal wave.

The Uygur and Chinese armies were routed. The Chinese commander escaped with only 160 men and fled back south across the mountains to Kocho. The Uygur general followed hard on his heels—his direct route north blocked by the Tibetans—and promised him temporary asylum in Ordu-Balik and then safe passage back to China. Since the Kocho garrison was isolated and vulnerable to attack, and there were no reinforcements to be had, the Chinese commander eventually agreed, and the two armies started their long journey north. But the Chinese commander had made an error of judgment: he was assassinated shortly After entering the Uygur capital.

Uygur troops were to return to Beshbalik the following year and retake the city, but Kutlug was not among them. His body had been left on the battlefield, and now his family wore the facial scars that were part of the Uygur rituals of

mourning.[63]

FOUR

The Princess's Tale

TAIHE, 821–843

I have left my beautiful country, China,
And have been taken to the nomads' camp.
My clothing is of coarse felt and furs,
I must force myself to eat their rancid mutton.
How different in climate and custom are China
and this land of nomads.

LADY WEN, "Eighteen Refrains to a Barbarian Flute," second–third century AD[1]

IN THE AUTUMN OF 821, Taihe, an imperial princess, sister of the current emperor of China and daughter of his predecessor, rode in a howdah on a Bactrian camel.[2] Her female attendants rode beside her on the treasured Nisean or Turkmen horses from the imperial pastures, not sidesaddle but with their silk pyjamed legs straddling the high-pommeled saddles.[3] As the sister of the Chinese emperor, the princess had been chosen as "tribute": she was on her way to wed the Uygur khagan to cement their countries' friendship. The emperor had already received soft cloth made of camel hair, brocades, sable furs, jade girdles, fifty camels, and a thousand ponies as her bride price. Although she came from the east—from the imperial palace

in China's capital, Chang'an—much of her dress, her ornaments, and her aesthetic preferences came from the west, from the distant Central Asian steppe through which she was now traveling.4

In her hair she wore fine pins of translucent white jade from the riverbed in Khotan and decorations made of ivory from India and lapis lazuli, traded in Khotan but originating farther west in Badakhstan (see figure 13). Her necklace was of gold with pearls and semi-precious stones, representing the seven treasures of Buddhism and fashioned by craftsmen in western Central Asia.5 Her Buddhist rosary beads were of amber from the shores of the Baltic.6 She carried perfumes for her body, her bath, and her clothes, some believed to be aphrodisiacs and many originating in India, and mixtures of aloeswood and musk to make her breath smell sweet. Before leaving Chang'an, she had started to learn a new style of dance, the whirling dance, usually performed by Sogdian girls dressed in crimson and green, spinning on a small round rug.7 And she was especially fond of Kuchean music, a pleasure she would continue to enjoy in the khagan's palace, where she played on a gold-inlaid zither. "Western" music was extremely popular among city society in China; several resident foreign orchestras at the imperial palace played at banquets and other functions, and the palace courtesans adapted the words of traditional Chinese songs to fit the new tunes. The courtesans in the city made up their own lyrics, oft en satires on political scandals or corrupt officials. Street children soon picked these up and ran around the streets singing them in return for a few coins.

FIGURE 13. Chinese Tang hair-style and phoenix hair ornaments from a stone engraving in an imperial Tang dynasty tomb near Chang’an. (Drawing by author After Shen 2012, 108.)

As an imperial princess, Taihe had left the palace infrequently, and then only to visit her country estate. But she was not wholly inactive or confined to the domestic sphere. She played polo, another import from the western regions, and, like many of the court ladies, she was an

excellent horsewoman:

> The Palace ladies in the front hall with their slender waists
> The first time they learn to ride they are greatly afraid.
> But soon they manage to sit up in the saddle and immediately want to gallop.
> How many times they lose the reins and clasp the pommel in their arms![8]

The imperial palace in Chang'an had its own polo field and five stable blocks that, apart from polo ponies, provided horses for generals, for hunting, and for ceremonial purposes.[9] Many of these were the Nisean horses from Ferghana and Merv, interbred with the small, tough steppe ponies used by the ordinary soldier and acquired as tribute or in trade from distant Central Asian kingdoms. Nisean horses were the subject of many legends. The most common held that they were half-dragon, were born in water, and could carry their riders to Heaven:

> The Heavenly Horses emerge from the Kushanas lands/dens
> Tiger markings along their backs, bones made for dragon wings.[10]

Chinese stories told of many countries renowned for their horses, such as the land in the far north, always covered in snow and called "the Land of the Dappled Horse," where it was said that the horses could understand human speech. Gift s of horses were received from numerous countries and peoples, including Kashmir, Gandhāra, and Arabia, but the moist valleys of Sogdia and Ferghana to the west of the Pamirs were the main supply for China's finest mounts. During the reign of the emperor Xuanzong, before Rokshan's rebellion, six famous "dancing horses" from Ferghana were stabled in the palace.[11] These horses performed their dance on the fifth day of the eighth month, the emperor's birthday, and were commemorated in stone reliefs.[12] But that was in the past. The Tibetans had raided the imperial pastures so

many times since then that it had not been possible to replenish the stock of fine horses. Now the Chinese military relied on the Uygurs for their vital supply of cavalry ponies, paying up to forty or even fifty bolts of silk per head under the implicit threat of Uygur raids should they refuse to pay.13 In 773, the emperor had tried to curb the Uygurs' extortionate demands when the amount asked for 10,000 horses exceeded the annual income of the Chinese state. Decreeing that "the afflictions of the people should not be increased," he had bought only 6,000. But now the Uygurs regularly sent herds numbering tens of thousands, draining the Chinese treasury. As each horse arrived at the Chinese pastures, it was branded with several marks to show its origin, agility, stamina, and occupation—whether it was a post horse, a mount for a general, or for use in government service.14

Taihe was the fourth Chinese princess to be promised to a Uygur khagan. The first had been her great-great-aunt, sent in 758 After the Uygurs had first helped fight the rebel Rokshan.15 She was no longer young when she was sent, having been widowed twice, and After only a year among the Uygurs she was widowed for a third time, After which she returned to China. Her younger sister, who had accompanied her, remained behind and married the next khagan.16 She died in Ordu-Balik in 790, two years After another princess, Taihe's great-aunt, Xian'an, was sent in a hastily contrived bid to obtain Uygur military assistance against the Tibetans.17 Xian'an stayed there until her death in 808, marrying three other khagans in succession. After stalling for seven years, in 820 the Chinese emperor had eventually offered Princess Yongan, Taihe's elder sister, to the previous khagan.18 Fortunately for her, the khagan died before she left Chang'an, and not long Afterward Yongan requested permission to be ordained as a Daoist priestess, thus avoiding any threat of future marriage alliances.19 She was

not the first Tang princess to take this course. The way had been led by Princess Gold-Immortal and Princess Jade-Perfected at the very beginning of the eighth century, who started the long ordination procedure as young girls. Their father used state funds to endow each with an abbey until complaints were made by the people and officials. Thereafter, the princesses used their own money to complete the work. Fifteen imperial princesses had since been ordained, including two of Taihe's nieces.[20]

Princess Taihe's fate had been decided only a month before she embarked on her journey, when nearly 600 Uygurs had entered Chang'an to collect Princess Yongan.[21] The original embassy had numbered several thousand, but the majority had been asked to wait at the border, since Chang'an was ill equipped to quarter so many foreign envoys at one time. Now that the khagan to whom Yongan had been promised had died, the emperor was in a dilemma. It was expensive for the court to give away a princess: the bride had to be sent with a dowry befitting her status, and the ponies and other goods brought by the Uygur embassy as "tribute" had to be purchased with hard currency—in this case, silk. But, though the Uygurs were not as strong as previously, they were still important allies and would expect the original agreement to be honored.

Eventually it was decided that Taihe would be sent in Yongan's place, and a minister was dispatched to inform the Uygur embassy of the emperor's decree. A Chinese embassy would accompany the princess to Ordu-Balik and bestow the insignia of office on the new khagan: China always maintained the pretence that her neighbors were vassal states. An armed escort of Uygur cavalry would join them at the border to ensure their safety. The need for this was emphasized only a week later when Tibetan raiders were repulsed just south of the princess's intended route. A few years before, Tibetan soldiers had reached within two days'

journey, or two stages, of Ordu-Balik itself. In fact, both sides hoped the guard would not be necessary as a Chinese embassy was already on its way to Lhasa to sign a peace treaty. This declared that “henceforth, on either side, there shall be no enmity, no warmongering and no seizure of territory.”[22]

The betrothal was announced on the first day of July, and Taihe left at the end of August by the city’s northeastern gate. The journey of over a thousand miles would take until the new year. Post horses could cover the distance in less than two months, but such a large caravan traveled slowly and stopped frequently. Taihe’s brother, the emperor, and all the officials lined up in rank to bid her a ceremonial farewell. The people of Chang’an had also come out to watch the spectacle. The procession of Uygur horsemen, the princess and her retinue, Chinese officials, and camels laden with gifts for the khagan took several hours to pass through the gate and start on its northward journey.

Taihe was on her way to a palace that could rival the imperial court in its opulence, but it must have felt as if she were going to a very alien land. The first part of her journey was through Chinese territory extending to the northernmost reaches of the Yellow river, which flowed from its source on the Tibetan plateau far to the southwest of Chang’an, crossed the Hexi corridor, and then made a long sweep north before turning east and then south, doubling back on itself almost to the capital. The land enclosed by this great curve was called the Ordos, a region of desert and mud. Beyond, to the north and west, lay the Gobi desert, and to the northeast the steppe home of other peoples such as the Kitans and the Tanguts. The Chinese sought to control the Ordos and had established garrisons on the far banks of the river. Trading posts had also been established there at the instigation of the Uygurs. But the Chinese hold on the territory was precarious. Since they had withdrawn their forces from the

western garrisons during the rebellion of 763, their western flank was unprotected. The Tibetans regularly crossed the Hexi corridor into Uygur territory and made raids along the western edges of the Ordos, and the Tanguts and Kitans, peoples who were to form powerful kingdoms in later centuries, threatened from the northeast. The eroded, stamped-earth walls marking the boundaries of earlier Chinese kingdoms and bisecting the river's bend at the southern edge of the Ordos were a reminder of the long struggle between the Chinese and their northern neighbors in this land.

Although the Chinese army had powerful crossbows, sophisticated armor, steel swords, gunpowder, and mechanical catapults, and though Chinese soldiers learned to ride and shoot like nomads—indeed, many were themselves nomads—they never succeeded in dominating the many peoples pressing at their borders.23 For this reason, they had long used diplomacy and bribes as much as military force in defense of their territory. The princess was part of this strategy. The practice of sending princesses to cement alliances had started hundreds of years before, and during the course of the current Chinese dynasty over twenty "princesses" were dispatched.24 In the seventh century, a Turkic khagan had asked for a Chinese prince to marry his daughter, provoking outrage at court: "Never since ancient times has an imperial prince been married to a barbarian woman."25 The dissenting official was exiled, and a grand-nephew of the empress was duly sent off to the steppe.26 However, before the princesses sent to the Uygurs, only distant relatives of the emperor—or daughters by lesser concubines—had been chosen as the brides of foreigners.

Since the rebellion of Rokshan, the ruling Tang dynasty had grown insecure. This was particularly evident in an increasing rejection of all things foreign, including people: ethnicity, then as now, was largely a matter of politics. The

Tang rulers of China claimed descent from the founder of Daoism, but in fact their forebears were from the very cultures they now dismissed as “barbaric”—those of Central Asia. The influences from outside that had been welcomed in the early part of the dynasty were now so assimilated into Chinese culture that few could discern where traditional culture ended and “foreign” influence began. But where the influence was obvious—as in the case of Buddhism—there was growing xenophobia. Buddhism had been practiced in China since at least the first centuries AD and had been fully assimilated by the start of the Tang dynasty in 618, but toward the end of the dynasty some ministers began to use it as a scapegoat for China’s ills. In 819, a leading statesman and scholar submitted an anti-Buddhist polemic to the emperor.27 It was rejected, but over the next few decades it became habitual to divert the blame from the government for high taxes and rising inflation onto “foreigners” and “foreign religions”—such as Uygur moneylenders, Sogdian Manichaeans, and tax-exempt Buddhist monks.

The land to which Taihe was going in the autumn of 821 lay northwest of Chang’an, but the caravan first headed northeast to the Yellow river valley at Hezhong, meaning “On the River.” The heart of China was defined by the course of the Yellow river and the fertile plains nurtured by its loess-laden waters. The caravan then headed north through the province called “East of the River” to Taiyuan, “Extremity of the Plains.” A Manichaean temple had been established there in 807 at the behest of the Uygurs to serve the considerable community of their countrymen; it was the first large town beyond their border. The town had recently become a major producer of expensive wine made from the mares’ teat grape from Kocho, and the loess slopes of the surrounding countryside were covered with vineyards.28 Most of the produce was sent to Chang’an where Taihe’s brother, the emperor, on first tasting it had declared: “When I drink this, I

am instantly conscious of harmony suffusing my four limbs. It is the true 'Princeling of Grand Tranquillity.'"[29] A contemporary Chinese poet wrote further on the charms of both the vineyards and their produce in the Taiyuan regions (also known at the time as "Qin"):

The grape vine from untrodden lands,
Its branches gnarled in tangled bands,
Was brought the garden to adorn
With verdure bright; now, upward borne,
The branches climb with rapid stride,
In graceful curves, diverging wide;
Here spread and twin, there languid fall,
Now reach the summit of the wall;
And then with verdure green and bright,
Enchanting the beholder's sight,
Beyond the mansion's roof they strive,
As though with conscious will alive.
And now the vine is planted out,
It climbs the wooden frame about,
The lattice shades with tender green,
And forms a pleasant terrace screen.
With dregs of rice well soak the roots,
And moisten all its leafy shoots,

The flowers like silken fringe will blow,
And fruit-like clustered pearls hang low.
On mares' milk grapes the hoarfrost gleams,
Shine dragon scales like morning beams.
Once hither came a travelling guest;
Amazed his host he thus addressed,
As strolling round he chanced to see
The fruit upon th' o'er-hanging tree:
We men of Qin, such grapes so fair,
Do cultivate as gems most rare;
Of these delicious wine we make,
For which men ne'er their thirst can slake.

Take but a measure of this wine,
And Lianzhou's rule is surely thine.[30]

The caravan stayed in Hezhong for some time, resting, taking on provisions— including both grapes and wine for the princess on her journey—and preparing for the next stage, which continued north on the eastern side of the Yellow river, thus avoiding the treacherous and dangerous Ordos country, and led to the army garrison where the Sogdian and Uygur merchants had been massacred half a century before.[31] From there, it turned west to follow the northern banks of the river. Hills rose on the northern horizon, but once past these, at the river's southern bend, the road veered north to the Piti springs. This was the northern boundary of Chinese territory. It would be many months of marches across the Gobi desert before the Princess would see water in any abundance, let alone another river.

The short summer was nearing its end, and the ground was hardening with frost, but the weather was clear, dry, and bright. The caravan only traveled short distances, stopping to camp early each day to allow the animals to graze. Later the camels would need fodder, for unlike horses they were unable to scrape away the ice and snow from the pasture with their soft pads, and the Uygurs would hunt gazelle to supplement their diet of mutton and beef. When the second khagan had declared the country Manichaean, apart from ordering that "all sculpted and painted images of demons be entirely destroyed by fire," he had also suggested that the people should "eat vegetables."[32] The Manichaean clergy were vegetarians, and lay believers—though not subject to such strictures—were expected to be abstemious. However, Taihe saw little sign of the suggestion being heeded during her journey or thereafter. Everyone ate meat in large quantities: cattle, sheep, yak, camel, horse, gazelle, fox, hare, or whatever could be raised or caught. Nor were they restrained in drink. The caravan carried large quantities of

fermented mares' milk.

As they advanced into Uygur territory, there was little to remind Taihe of home. She had not visited much of her homeland, but she knew it through literature and art. For her, it was a land of verdant river valleys, lush and spectacular mountain scenery, raindrops falling on plantain leaves, chrysanthemums set among the rust-colored leaves of autumn, bamboo-covered hillsides, and distinct seasons characterized by a variety of flowers, insects, and birds. The contrast with the desolate snow-swept gray landscape she awoke to every morning was startling. The words written by a Chinese princess sent west as a bride eight hundred years before ran through her mind: "My family married me to a lost horizon. . . . Were I only a brown goose and could fly back home."[33]

One long day in the seemingly featureless landscape followed another. The princess had nothing to do. In the mornings, she was dressed and brought food by her attendants, and her camel was prepared. During the first couple of months, when the weather was still mild and the landscape showed some variety, the stages passed quite quickly. When she arrived at each camp, her tent would already be erected and rugs, tables, and small folding chairs laid out inside. She was brought water for washing, fresh tea, and various dainties to eat. On many evenings, she would practice her zither or try to compose poetry about the landscape and her feelings of homesickness, both perennial subjects of the Chinese poet. But, After a few months, the dry air was bitter with frost and she had to cover her face for protection; there was nothing to look at anyway. She grew bored with the interminable journey as each day merged into the next, and each month into the one that followed, until she lost all sense of time.

The lunar new year, an important festival in China, was approaching, and she thought of the celebrations she would

be missing. But gradually the mood in the caravan became livelier, and she realized that they were finally approaching the capital. A track became discernible, and it soon widened into a well-trodden road. Now there were small villages and farms scattered across the land, and people lined the road to watch the caravan pass. Riders went ahead to inform the khagan of their approach, and one evening a delegation arrived from the capital, now only two stages away. After some discussion between the delegation and the Uygurs in the caravan, the Chinese officials were approached. It transpired that the khagan wished the princess to proceed with them by a slightly different route so that she would arrive at the capital unannounced and could be presented to the khagan in private: he wanted to see her before the marriage.34 The request was refused, despite protests from the Uygur courtiers that a previous Chinese princess had agreed to this. The ministers accompanying Taihe assured the khagan's envoys that it would be an unallowable breach of protocol, whatever the previous princess had agreed.

The next day, the walls of Ordu-Balik came into distant view on the left bank of the Orkhon river. The river spread across the flat land in broad shallow branches. Since it was deep winter—February 822—the water was frozen and so easy to cross. The trees, like everything else, were gray with frost. The city itself was rectangular, enclosed by walls that stretched almost five miles from north to south and one and a half miles from east to west.35 The royal palace, which was also walled, lay in the northeastern corner. Nine large iron gates led into the city. The princess could clearly see the khagan's famous tent, erected on the flat roof of his palace and completely covered in gold.36 She had heard that the Tibetan emperor also had such a tent, a link with the nomadic origins. The khagan would hold court in his tent, which could accommodate a hundred men. There were numerous other tents erected both inside and outside the city

walls, most of them to house the large Uygur army.

When they reached the city, Taihe was shown into a large tent. Thick wool rugs covered the walls and floors, overlaid with finer silk carpets. The large cushions laid out along the walls of the tent were covered with the finest Chinese and Sogdian woven silk and brocade in red, green, blue, and gold, and the armrests were made of sanderswood decorated with gold, camphorwood, and stained ivory. Furs of every description were heaped around—sable, ermine, spotted hare, and purple-dyed deerskin. The princess was offered wine from a purple cup with a delicate motif of grapes and vines made from translucent crystal, rare even in the Chinese court. Before her, she saw low tables spread with fruits and nuts—apricots, grapes, melons, apples, walnuts, and almonds—and she was then served fragrant tea in a delicate cup of fine porcelain, lobed in imitation of Persian silverware. There were few luxuries that the Uygurs could not afford with their plentiful supply of Chinese silk from the horse sales. Her interpreter explained that the khagan wished her to dress in Uygur clothes and that he was sending Uygur princesses to teach her the customs of their country. An older maidservant would help her dress and prepare her hair. The Chinese ministers, in the meantime, selected a suitable day for the ceremony.

Taihe's Chinese dress consisted of an underrobe and baggy trousers made of thin silk, the trousers tied with a cord. Over this she wore a richly woven robe, like the Japanese kimono, tied loosely below the waist and cut so as to reveal considerable cleavage. On top, she wore an apron-like garment in a contrasting color which was fastened around her chest (as in traditional Korean dress) and reached to the floor. Finally, she draped a long, narrow silk shawl across her shoulders and over her arms. Her hair was elaborately styled in a high bun, and the toes of her red silk embroidered

slippers curled up so that they could just be seen peeping out below her robe. (Foot-binding was a custom adopted later.)[37] The silk had all been woven in the imperial workshops. In the heady days of the emperor Xuanzong, a hundred imperial weavers made cloth solely for the Lady Yang, the emperor's favorite consort. Then it had been the fashion among palace ladies to wear the "foreigners' robe," a plain, collared robe like that worn by Turkic horsemen (see figure 14). Now the latest fad was for impossibly wide sleeves. They used as much silk as the rest of the robe.

On the chosen day, Taihe first had to show herself outside the tent dressed in ordinary Uygur clothes and bow to the khagan, who was sitting on the tower of the palace. She then returned inside, and the Uygur maidservant helped her to change. She was given an undergown of red silk with a plain round neck, very different from the décolleté fashionable in the Chinese court. Over this went a long crimson robe with wide embroidered lapels and decorated with red and white braid down the central opening. The braiding continued around the sleeves and skirt of the robe. The sleeves were narrow, again in contrast to Chinese fashion. Next, her hair was styled in large loops on either side of her head and decorated with gold and lapis pins and animal ornaments. Then a wide, red silk scarf was wound around her head, both ends falling down her back almost to the floor, though tied in elaborate bows at her hips. Finally, she was given long gold earrings and a narrow gold crown resembling a small boat with high points fore and aft (see figure 15).[38]

Now dressed in her royal robes, she again left the tent and bowed. Then she was helped into a sedan chair that was led by the nine chief ministers nine times around the court. After this she climbed up the tower and sat beside the khagan, facing east. The khagan's silk robe was also long but had a high collar and bore a pattern of large roundels. He was bearded and moustached, and he wore his hair long. On his

head perched a high pointed crown held in place by a red ribbon fastened under his chin. Broad ribbons wound around his hair and reached down his back. His robe was split up each side to reveal his high leather boots, and he wore an elaborately decorated belt made of gold and jade, from which hung his jewel-encrusted dagger. The ministers were similarly dressed, though less finely. They presented themselves in turn to the khagan, addressing him as “God of the Moon and God of the Sun,” and then to Taihe, recognizing her as their new khatun—their queen.39 She also noticed the Manichaean clergy in their distinctive white robes and tall white hats; unlike the Buddhists, they did not shave their heads, and many had long beards.

FIGURE 14. Chinese girl dressed in *hufu* (foreigners' robe), from a mural in an imperial Tang dynasty tomb near

Chang’an. (Drawing by author.)

FIGURE 15. Uygur donor princess holding a lotus bud from ninth-century murals in a Buddhist cave complex near Kocho. (Bezeklik, Temple 9, now in Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, III 6876b. Drawing by author.)

Taihe was not simply a symbol of the alliance between the Uygurs and the Chinese: as khatun, she had power in the Uygur court. She was allowed to establish her own quarters, and for almost a year she had the company of the Chinese ministers. When they had to return to China in the late autumn of 822, she was distraught. She arranged a great banquet and presented them with bolts of silk and all sorts of ornaments to take back to her sisters, including hairpieces made of beaten gold in the shape of the steppe deer.

That summer, the khagan had received an envoy, Tamīm ibn Bahr, sent by the leader of the Arab forces in Transoxania. There had been Arab embassies in Chang'an, so Taihe knew something of these peoples. Her husband sent relays of horses to transport the envoy from the Issyk-kul region in the far southwest of Uygur territory. Tamīm ibn Bahr traveled for twenty days across the steppe where, he reported, there was grass and water but no villages and therefore no food. The men in charge of the horses lived in tents at each post but had no spare provisions. After this, he reached the start of cultivation and traveled for another twenty days through villages and farms before reaching Ordu-Balik. He also reported seeing the golden tent from afar, but the queen is not mentioned in what is extant of his account.40

We know nothing of Taihe's relationship with her new husband. China during the Tang dynasty was not particularly prudish, and the restrictions that characterized late imperial Chinese society were not yet in force: foot-binding only started to appear in the next century; divorce by mutual consent was still part of the legal code; and widows were allowed to remarry. Uygur women were probably subject to even fewer restrictions than their Chinese counterparts; Uygur princesses accompanied several of the embassies to China, including the one sent for Taihe. Chinese authors

produced explicit sex manuals, and the "Art of the Bedchamber" was regarded as a branch of medicine.[41] Deprivation of sex was considered by many doctors to be injurious to health, though Daoist practitioners enjoined their male patients not to ejaculate, believing that semen contained the vital energy—*qi*—necessary for health and long life. A seventh-century text by a Daoist physician, for example, wrote:

> Until a man has reached forty he is usually full of vigorous passion. But as soon as he has passed his fortieth year he will suddenly notice that his potency is decreasing and, just as that time, countless diseases will descend on him like a swarm of bees. If this is allowed to continue then he will be beyond cure, but Pengzi has said, "Curing one human being by another is the real cure." Thus when a man reaches forty it is time for him to acquire a thorough knowledge of the Art of the Bedchamber. . . . The principle of the Art of the Bedchamber is very simple, yet few can practise it. It is simply to copulate with ten different women on one night without once emitting semen.[42]

Erotic poetry, essays, and literature also circulated, written by respected literati. Reproduction was discussed openly. The dates of menstruation of all the wives and concubines of the Chinese emperor were carefully noted, along with the date and hour of each of the emperor's every successful sexual encounter.[43] We do not know if Princess Taihe was similarly monitored in the Uygur court nor if she bore the khagan children.

The princess's husband died only two years After her arrival, and a new khagan was appointed. Sixty-five years earlier, the first Chinese princess to marry a Uygur khagan had been informed that, After his death, she was expected to commit suicide so that she could be buried alongside him. She refused to do so but made a concession by slashing her face with a knife, a traditional Uygur sign of mourning.[44] Taihe did not commit suicide either, but neither did she leave, though she would have had the opportunity to do so

either with the Uygur embassy sent to inform the Chinese court of the khagan's death, or with the Chinese embassy that was sent back to acknowledge the new khagan in the spring of 825. The latter brought a staggering half million bolts of silk for pony purchases.

Perhaps Taihe was persuaded to remain in Ordu-Balik by her Chinese advisers for political reasons, or to avoid the expense attendant on providing a new princess; perhaps by this time she had married the new khagan. Embassies arrived every few years from China, and the city was home to a considerable Chinese population. The embassies always brought letters, news, and gift s for her and would pay her court, and in return she sent elaborate gift s of her own, among them seven female archers, exceptionally skilled on horseback, and two young boys from the tribe of Shatuo Turks on the Uygur empire's southern border.45 Another khagan came to the throne in 832 After the assassination of his predecessor and many of his ministers. Taihe remained. By that time, Uygur fortunes were in serious decline: there was dissent at court and frequent incursions by Kirghiz armies from the northwest.

The Kirghiz were a forest-dwelling people from the northwest of the Uygur empire, some forty days' journey from the Uygur capital, a land where "the pine trees grew so tall that an arrow could not reach their peaks."46 They had been in conflict with the Uygurs for twenty years. Their language was Turkic, and, according to Chinese and Persian descriptions, they were a tall people with light hair and green or blue eyes.47 They despised those with dark hair and dark eyes, believing them to be the descendants of a renegade Chinese general of the first century BC who had defected to the nomads. Many of their customs differed from those of the Turks: they did not lacerate their faces as a sign of mourning, and their ruler was called the *aje,* not *khagan* (though they later adopted the Turkic appellation).48

In 839, a crisis was reached in Ordu-Balik when the khagan executed two of his ministers for treason, and their supporters retaliated by assassinating him. The winter of 839 was exceptionally severe. Frost settled early into the earth, there were heavy falls of snow, and by the end of the year supplies of fodder had been exhausted. Livestock died in the tens of thousands. The army defending the capital was no longer able to repel the continuing Kirghiz advances, and, in 840, they seized the capital, killed the new khagan, and set fire to the city. Its residents and those who lived on the surrounding farms fled south. Princess Taihe was captured.49

The Kirghiz soon moved back to their base in the forests, but owing to the lack of any serious opposition, they held control of the former Uygur lands until 824, when the Kitans moved in from the northeast borders of China.

The Kirghiz provided an armed escort to accompany Taihe back to her homeland, but they were attacked by the rump of the Uygur army, and the princess was taken to the new khagan's camp.50 (It was only in 842 that the Chinese court received news of her whereabouts.) Meanwhile, the tens of thousands who had fled for their lives started arriving at the bend of the Yellow river on the border of China in the autumn of 840, and they came under a rival leadership. In early winter 841, the Chinese sent food and clothing to the restless Uygurs—though it is not clear whether the supplies ended up with the border refugees or with the new khagan's camp. Negotiations started with the leader of the border refugees, and he eventually negotiated residence in China, though he soon returned to the border with the Chinese army against his rival.

Clashes took place throughout 842, and the Chinese, unaware of the death of the Tibetan emperor, feared that the Uygurs would cross the Yellow river during the winter freeze and join forces with the Tibetan armies. But Taihe was still

with them, and the Chinese were concerned to assure her safety. In the spring of 843, a Chinese expeditionary force took the Uygur camp unawares.51 The princess was alerted by a Chinese spy and told to hide in her cart. The Uygurs were driven back, and thousands were killed at a place then named by the Chinese “Slaughtering the Uygurs Hill.”52 Many more surrendered, and still others fled south to the Silk Road where they settled in Ganzhou, on the Hexi corridor, and Kocho, in the Tarim basin. The khagan also fled but was hunted down and murdered a few years later in the Gobi desert. Over the next few generations, those Uygurs remaining in north China became naturalized.

Meanwhile, the princess was escorted south and reached the Chinese capital in the late spring of 843. Her Uygur escort was turned back at the city gates, and rumors that she had murdered the Uygur prince accompanying her were not confirmed.53 The emperor called his ministers together to discuss what to do with her. Some were opposed to allowing her back because of hostilities with the Uygurs, but the emperor pleaded on her behalf. In the end, it was decided to accept her, and the imperial guards were sent to escort her to the palace from Zhangjing temple outside the northeastern gate of the city from whence she had departed over two decades before. Her Central Asian life was over.

FIVE

The Courtesan's Tale

LARISHKA, 839–890

Outside my door the dog barks,
I know what it is, my lover's here.
Off with my stockings, down the perfumed stairs,
My good-for-nothing lover is drunk tonight.
I help him into my silk-curtained bed.
Will he take off his silk gown? oh no, not he.
My lord is drunk tonight, and drunk let him be.
Better that than sleeping alone.

Lyrics by anonymous poetess to the tune

"The Drunken Young Lord," tenth century[1]

Larishka's maidservant found her sitting in front of the mirror, her hand raised but arrested in action, a small dog at her feet.[2] The girl chided her mistress; her guests had already arrived and were expecting her. Larishka dipped a brush into a tiny pot of yellow orpiment pigment and carefully painted a crescent moon on her forehead to cover a scar.[3] She was no longer young, but her thick makeup made it difficult to tell her age. The maidservant checked her mistress's hair ornaments and helped her finish dressing. Then Larishka took her lute from its case and carefully removed the silk wrapping. She fingered the strings and

warmed her hands at a brazier before leaving the room to entertain her guests.

It was a domestic scene but for the fact there was little in Larishka's life that could be called domestic. She had no husband or children; she knew little of housework or cooking; and only twice in her life had she had a place she considered her home. The first was her grandmother's house, and the second the place in which, in 890, she now lived. Both were in the city of Kucha in the northern Tarim basin.4

Like her grandmother and mother before her, Larishka had been trained as an entertainer. From late childhood, she had attended music, singing, and dancing classes, but, having shown great early promise, she was trained to specialize in the Kuchean lute, a four-stringed instrument with a bent neck.5 She could perform solo pieces but more often played in an orchestra that had three sections: percussion, strings, and woodwinds, including flute and oboe. Most compositions were in three parts, with the mode of the piece established by the pitch of the woodwinds in the prelude and developed in the second and third parts.

Kuchean music was famed from Samarkand to Chang'an. Chinese music at the time comprised twenty-eight modes, which were based largely on the tuning of the Kuchean lute. Skill on the small Kuchean drum, which rested on a stand, became de rigueur among emperors and noblemen in China.6 One of its practitioners was the eighth-century Chinese Tang dynasty emperor Xuanzong who, in addition to his six famous "dancing horses," housed 30,000 musicians and dancers in the imperial palace, many of them from Kucha or playing in a Kuchean style. Kuchean orchestras also accompanied singers in musical dramas. The titles of the songs they played reveals the wide geographical and cultural milieu from which they were drawn: for example, "The Three Platforms of the Turks"; "South India"; "Music of Kucha"; "Music for Releasing Goshawks"; and "Watching the Moon in

Brahman Land."[7] Kuchean singers could sing in many languages, including Sanskrit.

Many of the musical dramas had originated in India, but, as they were passed along the trade routes, they absorbed new elements and were adapted to suit local culture. From China, they were passed on to Korea and Japan, where some are still performed today. They varied from traditional Indian legends and stories of the gods—the Hindu god Śiva featured in several—to depictions of everyday life, such as preparation for a polo game. Many were little more than burlesques: "Sprinkling the Barbarians with Water" was accompanied by drums, lutes, and harp, and it was performed outside during the winter solstice by youths dressed only in masks. In it, the dancers splashed cold water on each other and on unwary members of the audience.[8]

Kuchean dancers were as renowned as their fellow musicians for their skill, and they were sent by the Kuchean court to Samarkand and Chang'an as representatives of the best of its culture. Kuchean dance was not unlike Indian dance, with its emphasis on hip movements, changes of gesture, and expressive eyes, but it also adapted dance forms from other places, such as the famous Sogdian "whirling dance," performed by both men and women (see figure 16).[9] Music, song, and dance were Silk Road commodities, bought and sold like silver and jade. Itinerant dance troops from India, Burma, Cambodia, and Sogdia performed at the royal court as well as in the public marketplace of every town, and their "wares" were absorbed into the repertoire.

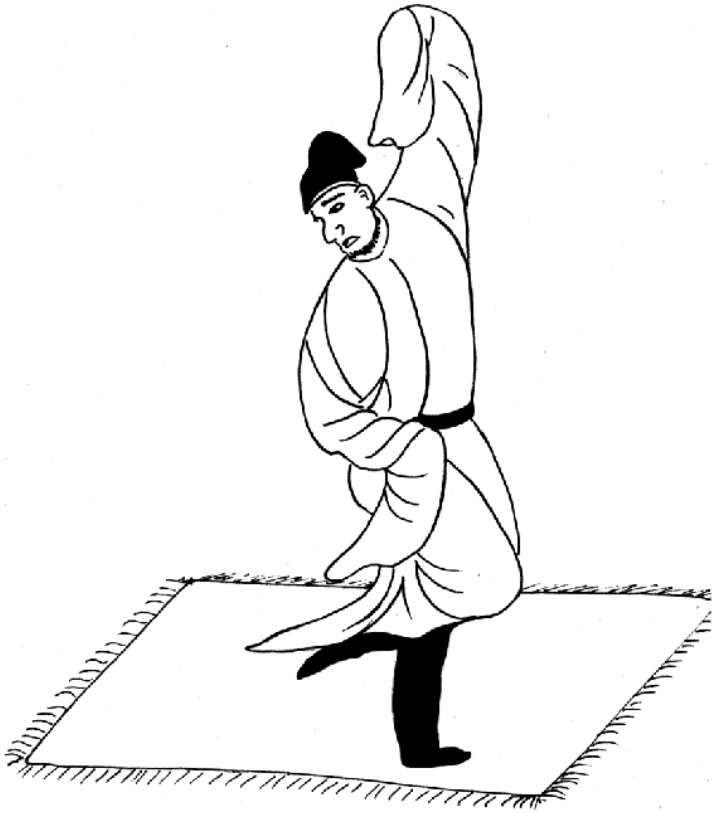

FIGURE 16. Sogdian dancer from a mural in a Chinese Tang dynasty tomb near Chang'an. (Drawing by author.)

The city of Kucha lay in the northern Tarim basin about halfway between Kashgar and Kocho, with the mighty peaks of the Tianshan rising to its north. It was walled and about six miles around, but its king ruled territory extending 300 miles from east to west and 200 miles north to south, including rich mineral deposits of gold, copper, iron, lead, and tin.10 Kucha itself was something of a maverick kingdom. Its people and language were Indo- European, and it maintained a loyalty to Theravāda Buddhism, even though the schools of Mahāyāna Buddhism were ubiquitous elsewhere in the Tarim. Kucha had many famous sons, among them one of the most prolific and respected translators of Buddhist sutras from Sanskrit into Chinese, the fourth-

century monk Kumārajīva, and one of the most successful Chinese generals of the mid-eighth century, Geshu Han. The general was Turkic rather than Kuchean, but, like all Tarim towns, Kucha had a cosmopolitan population.

Ever since Larishka could remember, there had been Uygurs in Kucha.[11] The first Uygur refugees had arrived in Kocho to the east of Kucha when she was a baby, fleeing their capital, Ordu-Balik, on the Orkhon river beyond the Tianshan as the Kirghiz armies approached. That was in the winter of 839– 40, when the Tibetans were still in control of much of the Tarim. Over the following years, many more Uygur refugees and soldiers fled from the Orkhon river southeast into China, where they massed on the northern borders and decided to settle, much to the consternation of the Chinese government, which had long experience with the Uygurs' skill in warfare. Regarding the Uygurs as a threat to their security, the Chinese secretly prepared for war and, in 843, annihilated most of the Uygur army. Thereafter, hundreds and then thousands of Uygur refugee families crossed the steppe and Tianshan to join the existing refugee communities in Ganzhou and Kocho. Their numbers ensured their supremacy, though there were skirmishes with Tibetans, who had been dominant in the Tarim for much of the previous century. But the Tibetan empire was coming to an end, and, within a few years, the Uygurs started to move westward from Kocho and the Uygur population in Kucha multiplied. Larishka was a young girl at that time, and she remembered their arrival clearly. They traveled in huge convoys, with their traditional felt tents piled on camels and carriages, and everyone, young and old, riding small, shaggy ponies, their progress marked by a great cloud of dust. The Uygur soldiers were eager to carve out a new kingdom for themselves After losing their former lands to the Kirghiz, and they soon asserted control over a large area around Kocho, extending west to Kucha.[12]

Kucha was used to garrisons of foreign soldiers. The Tibetans had been the most recent, and before that the city had been one of China's four western garrisons in the Tarim. The Kuchean royal family, who lived in a splendid palace faced with gold and jade, continued to rule even while offering allegiance to these foreign empires, and both Tibetan and Chinese families had made their homes in the city. A century before, the city had been besieged by troops of the Abbasid caliphate, and Kuchean storytellers still recounted how the king sent an urgent request to China for military aid to save the city. The Chinese emperor, it was said, asked the advice of a famous Zen Buddhist monk, who replied that he should request the aid of the troops of Vaiśravana, Heavenly King of the North, through the intercession of a foreign monk then resident in the capital. The foreign monk was duly summoned, and he and the emperor prayed together. At the very same moment, or so it was said, enormous beings descended in a great fog on Kucha, and the Arabs were driven away.13

The story symbolized the traditional twin reliance of Kucha on Buddhism and on foreign troops. Great statues of Buddha, ninety feet high, flanking the western gate, and the numerous monasteries and stupas in the city itself, were reminders of its debt to Buddhism. During the time that Chinese forces were stationed in the city, the Kuchean king was diligent in paying tribute to the emperor. He was reported to have sent fabulous presents, such as dragon horses (the off spring of mares and dragons who lived in one of the city's pools) and a stone dream-making pillow (all those sleeping on it would have incredible dreams of journeys over land and sea). Kucha was also a major supplier of sal ammoniac, an ingredient in many Chinese prescriptions for relieving congestion and used by metal smiths as a flux for soldering the gold mined in the Tianshan.14 Among the gift s of food were fresh fruits that

grew profusely in Kucha's temperate climate—grapes, pomegranates, pears, peaches, plums, and apricots. Kuchean almonds, too, were highly prized.

Soldiers had been responsible for most of Lariskha's travels and much of her livelihood. They were the cause of her departure from Kucha when she was little more than a girl. It had been the start of the lunar new year, which was marked by a great festival. Larishka and her troupe were to perform at a banquet that evening, but in the morning they went out on to the streets to be entertained themselves. The performers were as various as the goods traded on the Silk Road. Apart from watching musicians, dancers, and singers—and Larishka had a professional interest in these—she could chose to be diverted in any number of ways. Child acrobats somersaulted between camels. Ex-soldiers made a living as strongmen. Monks performed illusions of self-disembowelment. There were puppet shows, storytellers, conjurers, tight-rope walkers, performing midgets, jugglers, contortionists, and fire-eaters. But the big event of the day was held outside the city walls: it was traditional at the new year festival to select stallions, oxen, and bull camels to fight one another, and the outcome of each encounter was thought to indicate the state of the respective herds over the following year. That evening, performing at court to assembled chiefs and local nobles, Larishka was noticed by a general from the Uygur headquarters in Kocho. Much taken with the girl, he demanded that she accompany him on his return to Kocho to entertain his guests. She had no choice but to go.

Larishka's journey to Kocho marked the beginning of her itinerant life. She now joined hundreds of other men and women, many of them captured in war and enslaved, who traveled in the soldiers' wake and carried out a variety of services for them. Inevitably, a large number of the women fell or were forced into prostitution. Larishka was recognized

as a professional musician and joined the large band of entertainers who were called upon to perform at various celebrations, festivals, and private events, but the general soon made it clear that he expected other services from her. He was the first of several such “patrons.” In return for her services, musical and sexual, Larishka was kept in some comfort. She had a maidservant and ample supplies of fine cosmetics, silks, and jewelry, and she rode about the town of Kocho on a richly caparisoned horse.

Only months After her arrival at Kocho, she was on the move again. The general’s division had been ordered east as reinforcements. Uygur troops quartered at Lapchuk, east of Kocho, were wont to raid the nearby city of Hami, seizing the inhabitants, their belongings, and their livestock. Hami was not the only city to suffer from such depredations. Farms around Dunhuang, farther south, were frequently beset by Azha nomads from Koko-nor who were allies of the Uygurs. Now a Chinese general, Zhang Yichao, was preparing to retaliate. In 848, After raising a local army, General Zhang had driven the Tibetans from the city of Dunhuang and then from other towns to the west. Since their last emperor had been murdered by a Buddhist hermit in 842, Tibet had been in disarray, and its soldiers retreated from their Tarim forts, such as Miran, into the safety of the Kunlun mountains, there to fight on behalf of the various contenders for the Tibetan throne. Following his victories, General Zhang sent an envoy to the Chinese Tang emperor declaring his loyalty, and in return he was honored with the title of military governor to the “Returning to Allegiance Army District.” It was now 856, and Uygur and Azha spies reported that General Zhang was preparing to march north to confront the Uygurs of Lapchuk.

Lapchuk lay 350 miles north of Dunhuang, but the Chinese loyalists under General Zhang made the journey on forced marches, surprising the combined Uygur and Azha forces outside the city to drive them back into the walled town and

capture their vast herds of livestock. Larishka's patron was killed in the battle, but she did not have to fend for herself for long before she was claimed by an Azha chief. A few months later, when the Chinese troops had withdrawn south, Larishka started out for Koko-nor with the Azha, but near Dunhuang they were surprised by an armed posse of soldiers and men from the town. In the confusion that followed, Larishka was separated from the Azhas and forced to return with the Chinese to Dunhuang.

In Dunhuang, her music was greatly appreciated, and she soon found a new patron among the Chinese general's commanders. She also oft en played her lute for other officers, and one among them transcribed several of her works. She did not want for luxuries and was free to attend Buddhist services with her maidservant. She had always suffered from bad menstrual pains but found a Kashmiri monk named Chudda in the town who was able to prescribe an effective herbal remedy, obtained on his recent pilgrimage to Mount Wutai.15 Both were strangers to Dunhuang, and they oft en exchanged stories about their homelands when her patron was away on one of General Zhang's many campaigns against the Tibetan forces still holding eastern Silk Road towns. She also heard that a local artist had used her as a model for his commissions at the cave temples outside the city where many murals depicted dancers and orchestras— some of them on the backs of camels or in carts (see figure 17).16 At the time, she wore her hair in the Chinese style then fashionable in Dunhuang: gathered into a long bun falling in a lop-sided fashion on the top of her head.

Larishka's patron had quite a collection of textbooks on sex and erotic prints, and he oft en read her passages or showed her pictures describing new techniques and positions. One of his favorite books, *The Poetical Essay on Supreme Joy,* was written by the brother of a famous Chinese poet of the time and described how a newly married couple

would chose a romantic setting— a pagoda in the moonlight, or the library window in early spring—and sit together to look at the illustrations in a sexual handbook.17 A couch was prepared for them, surrounded by screens, and there follows a lengthy and explicit description of their foreplay, until “the woman’s expression changes, her voice falters, her hairpins fall out and her chignon is in disorder, tresses falling down at the side over her languid eyes. Her hair comb loosens and hangs down over her shoulder like a sickle moon.”18 The section ends: “The joys of such moments shall not be forgotten until the end of their days.”

Despite her prayers to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who was supposed to help all those who cried out to him, Larishka was not fated to have a settled life. In 867, General Zhang, having finally driven the Tibetans from east of Dunhuang, decided to abdicate in favor of his nephew and retire home to China. He was accompanied by a retinue of hundreds, including Larishka, with a division of soldiers to guard them against raiders on the long journey east. In China, Larishka’s patron announced that he no longer required her services. Women were oft en passed on as gift s from one man to another, but Larishka’s patron decided instead to sell her as a courtesan to a “stepmother.”19 He had papers confirming that she was a prisoner-of-war, so there were no problems with the authorities. Larishka was still young, and her skills as a musician ensured a good price. Thus, her life changed yet again.

FIGURE 17. Musicians on a bullock cart from part of a painting on silk from Dunhuang. (The British Museum, 1919, 0101, 0.87. Drawing by author.)

The city of Chang’an covered thirty square miles and had a population of nearly two million, but it was several years before Larishka saw much beyond the courtesan quarter, which lay just southeast of the Imperial City, abutting the Eastern Market.20 On the other side of the market lay an exclusive district containing the villas of high officials, luxurious hotels, Daoist and Confucian temples, and the palaces of provincial representatives. The “stepmothers” who ran the courtesan houses were themselves mostly former courtesans. Both the houses and the women in them were registered with the local authorities and paid taxes, receiving government protection in return. They were graded according to the services they offered and by the accomplishments of their girls. At the lowest end of the scale were government-run brothels where the girls were

prisoners-of-war, convicted criminals, or the wives and daughters of criminals. Clients visited them for sex and nothing more, though they sometimes came away with gonorrhea or other sexually transmitted diseases. (Syphilis was not to appear in China for several centuries.)[21]

At the other end of the scale were houses offering the services of girls trained for several years to be “mistresses of the table.” Apart from musical skills, they were well versed in drinking songs and games and were excellent conversationalists. They were hired as companions for banquets and were expected to drink along with their patrons, though they had been taught ploys to avoid getting drunk themselves. Chewing cloves was supposed to be particularly effective.[22] The girls came from all backgrounds, but most had been sold by impoverished parents or kidnapped as children. After entering the house, they went though several years of rigorous training. The best were adept at composing poetry and were paid for their cultural rather than their sexual skills; the going rate was 16,000 strings of copper coins per evening.[23]

Stories abounded about legendary girls. One was so proficient in the art of perfuming herself, it was said, that when she went out of doors, “bees and butterflies followed her, in love with her fragrance.”[24] Another girl had been fed with perfumes as a child, and by the time she was grown her body was saturated with a natural fragrance.[25] This story reminded Larishka of the gecko lizards, so-called “palace warders.” Her stepmother told her of the geckos that were bred at the imperial palace and fed on cinnabar until its redness permeated their bodies. They were then killed, and their bodies were pounded into a paste used to mark the emperor’s concubines. The marks of the gecko, tradition said, disappeared when the concubine had sex.[26]

Larishka was no freer than the palace concubines. Her stepmother was her warden, and initially she was not allowed

out unless accompanied by either her stepmother or a servant. She was too old to be trained in the refined and subtle arts of the hostess and drinking companion, and she was hired out almost immediately on the basis of her musical skills. But it was impossible to refuse the advances of the most assiduous and generous patrons: this would have displeased her stepmother and made her position in the house uncomfortable. Larishka had no money of her own and relied on her stepmother for everything: her food, clothes, cosmetics, perfumes, and musical instruments. Some women found men to redeem them and set them up as concubines, but hardly any achieved a position as principal wife, and most were discarded when they grew old.

While she was in Chang'an, Larishka heard the other girls talk about one of the most famous Chang'an courtesans. Originally from a poor family, she was able to support herself, without a stepmother, on what her clients gave her for composing poetry. Then she moved out of the city to a lover's home, but his principal wife was jealous, and there were frequent rows between the women. During their many subsequent separations, the courtesan composed sad and passionate poems for her lover:

> The mountain road is steep, the stone path dangerous,
> But it is not the road that pains me, but my love for you.
> Hearing the tinkling of the breaking ice, I think of your lovely voice,
> The snow on the far mountain peaks reminds me of your pale face.
> Don't listen to vulgar songs, don't drink the spring wine.
> Don't invite leisurely guests for long nights of chess.
> Remember our sworn bond of love that should last forever,
> Even if our living together tarries to be restored.
> Although I hate this lonely trek, alone on a winter's day,
> My hope is at last to see you again when the full moon is in the sky.
> Separated from you, what can I offer?
> Only this one poem, stained with bright tears.[27]

Eventually she had to leave her lover for good, and she took up residence in a Daoist nunnery, though this did not change her lifestyle. Her parties were renowned, and all the most elegant young scholars and officials were invited— with the religious authorities, it was rumored, getting rich off the profits of sales of wine and food to the guests. But when she was arrested on charges of beating her maidservant to death, none came to her aid. Larishka never knew whether the charge was true. Some people said that the courtesan had been framed by resentful creditors. In any case, she was tried and convicted of murder, for which the penalty was execution, and the sentence was carried out in 871.

Although Larishka stayed in Chang'an for nearly two decades, she never considered it her home, despite her own suite of rooms, a maidservant, and a pet lap dog. The house she lived in was the stepmother's; she was an employee. She tried to find a patron who would take her as his concubine and establish her in a separate residence, but such men were few. There were some who continued to appreciate her skill on the lute, but many more rejected her, and she grew old in this house. Each year she had to spend longer over her makeup to hide the signs of age, for her green eyes and light hair alone were no longer sufficient to assure her attention. Larishka powdered her face, taking care to cover the fine wrinkles around her eyes and mouth. It was the fashion among high-class women to apply massicot, yellow lead, to the forehead, and courtesans followed their example. She used an indigo stick to paint her eyelids and make a small beauty mark on her cheek. Her eyebrows were plucked, and she drew two marks, like the wings of a butterfly, high on her forehead with the indigo stick. Her lipstick was made from onycha, blended with wax and the ashes of fragrant fruits and flowers.28 Her nails were painted with an extract of balsam mixed with alum.29 Finally, she applied various scents to her body. Her clothes were perfumed with sweet

basil, and a small, delicately embroidered silk-gauze bag hanging from her waist contained other fragrant herbs and flowers.30 Only After this was she ready to meet a client.

As her earning powers decreased, Larishka spent more and more time in the house training the younger girls and chatting with her stepmother, with the aim of being appointed as her successor. She was extremely fond of her pupils, and one girl in particular showed unusual aptitude at the lute. Kuchean music was no longer so popular in China: like so much else imported along the trade routes, it had become unfashionable as the Chinese sought to rediscover and promote home-grown traditions in a time of political disintegration. Nevertheless, the taverns and restaurants were full of western girls:

> The Western courtesan with features like a flower
> Stands by the wine warmer and laughs with the breath of spring.
> Dancing in a dress of sheer silk gauze, she asks
> "You won't be going anywhere, sir, surely not before you are drunk?"31

In the autumn of 880, rumors circulated in the city that a group of rebels were advancing toward the capital from the south. Periodic rebellions had occurred there for many years. All had either petered out or eventually been suppressed by government troops, but each campaign had further drained the already depleted treasury, and each subsequent increase in taxes compounded popular discontent. Farmers forced into bankruptcy had nothing to lose by joining rebel bands. However, the government had not been seriously threatened by a rebellion since that of Rokshan a century earlier.

The residents of Chang'an were used to stories about rebellions—this particular one had been rumbling on since 874—but they believed that the army would not allow the rebels to enter the imperial city and so remained sanguine even when it was reported that they were just beyond the final pass leading to the city. Unfortunately, the army sent to

halt the rebels' advance was of little use. The troops stationed in the capital were drawn from the sons of the wealthy, but more Often than not their fathers bought their sons out of military service, paying anyone, including the sick, willing to take their place. Consequently, the motley army was routed by the rebels, who then marched on the city.32

It was late afternoon when the advance guard arrived. The emperor and several of his wives had secretly fled the night before. Soldiers and residents alike now took the opportunity to loot the imperial treasuries and offered no resistance to the rebels. One of the generals even went out of the city gates to greet the rebel commander: he knew that this man might well become the next emperor, and it was therefore important to impress him. The rebel commander was magnanimous in victory, declaring that his objective in taking up arms had been to benefit the common people, and the inhabitants of Chang'an welcomed him and his soldiers. Nevertheless, many people stayed barricaded indoors. Their fears were not unfounded. Discipline could not be maintained, and the rebel soldiers, jubilant at their victory, sacked the city. Larishka and her fellow courtesans escaped lightly, since the rebels were chiefly interested in the wealthy and the influential, but they did not dare go out on the streets. Three days later, the rebel leader declared himself emperor of a new dynasty.

The rebel soldiers soon grew tired of plunder, and their generals reasserted control. By May 881, things were almost back to normal, the courtesans being kept especially busy with all the soldiers in town. But just as the residents were starting to get used to the new regime, the soldiers withdrew. Imperial forces had regrouped and were advancing from the west. Once more the city was invaded by soldiers, and these were no more disciplined than their rebel counterparts. Again the people barricaded themselves in their houses and

waited for the worst.

Larishka would always remember the day the rebels marched back into the city to confront the imperial troops.[33] When soldiers broke into the house, she did not know which side they were on, such was the confusion. Only later did she learn that they were rebels. To her it made no difference. Having forced the imperial army out of the city, the rebels now declared war on the city's residents for having welcomed the imperial troops in the first place. The rebel commander ordered his forces to "wash out the city," but it was washed with blood rather than water.

Larishka was with the other girls and servants in an upstairs room. The sound of metal drums, galloping hoofs, shouts, and screams grew louder. The women held each other, none daring to speak of what was happening. Men came bursting into the room, swords drawn and blood on their faces. The stepmother and older servants were killed immediately, then the soldiers dragged the girls from each other's grasp and raped them in turn on the matted floor. Larishka had told the youngest to hide in a cupboard, but one of the soldiers heard her screaming. When Larishka saw him open the cupboard, she bit the man on top of her and, as he withdrew his hand in pain, she wriggled free and threw herself in front of the young girl. Enraged, the soldier raised his sword and struck her. When she regained consciousness, she saw the young girl lying beside her, her clothes torn off, her body slashed and her head severed. The soldiers had gone. The rest of her companions and her dog were also dead.

Larishka fled, leaving even her lute behind. She ran from alley to alley, cowering in doorways when she heard the approach of soldiers, until she reached the western gate of the city. Her only concern was to get as far away as possible from the scene of carnage. She was in open countryside before she stopped. It was night, and when she looked back

she could see only the flames of the burning city in the distance. It was her last view of Chang'an.

Larishka traveled west, toward her old home in Kucha. There were many other refugees on the move, and the guards at the Chinese border post on the edge of the desert did not try to stop them: their loyalty to the emperor was wearing thin. In any case, most of the guards had been recalled to help fight the rebels, leaving only a small force behind. Even so, the emperor did not succeed in retaking Chang'an until he enlisted the help of the Shatuo Turks in 883. By that time, the rebellion had spread throughout China, even to the burgeoning port cities such as Kanfu, where the rebels massacred foreign merchants in 878–79, among them Muslims, Jews, and Zoroastrians. These events were recorded by an Arab writer in 883, though barely mentioned by the Chinese historians.[34] The rebel leader was not cornered until the summer of 884, far to the east, where he cut his own throat to evade capture. The Chinese emperor returned only briefly to Chang'an before fleeing yet again from another group of rebels, and during that time many of China's military governors took advantage of the lack of control at the center to establish de facto autonomous fiefdoms. When some semblance of order was finally restored in 886, the capital lay in ruins. The emperor installed himself in a town to its west, where he died, at just twenty-seven years of age, in 888. It was now only a matter of time before the Tang dynasty fell. What is surprising is that it survived until 907, after which the empire was once again divided into a number of kingdoms. It was only reunited in 960 with the advent of the Song dynasty.

Beyond the border, Larishka joined a group of merchants who, hearing of the troubles, had decided not to proceed to China and were on their way back along the once thriving trade routes. She had to beg for food and take whatever transport was offered, but after several months she reached

Kucha safely. There she found family and friends to help her, and she established a house of her own. Larishka had left Kucha as a young woman in 855, twenty-six years before, and when she returned at the end of the century, it was to see even more signs of Uygur influence: in dress, art, religion, and culture as well as in administration. By now the Uygur khagan had established his summer capital at Kocho and a winter residence at Beshbalik, north of the Tianshan.35 His jurisdiction extended even beyond Kucha. Previously, Kuchean orchestras had always performed at regal and official ceremonies, but now Uygur military bands played loud, raucous music on their horns, drums, and gongs.

Larishka's girls were popular with the Uygur soldiers, but Larishka herself was Often called upon to play Kuchean songs by the older residents who preferred the traditional music. She never spoke of the rebels, but she could not forget that night in Chang'an. Unlike the scar on her forehead, her memories did not fade. Her maidservant Often found her sitting lost in thought, tears rolling down her cheeks.

SIX

The Pilgrim's Tale

CHUDDA, 855–870

The Kingdom of Kashmir is about 2,000 miles in circumference and is surrounded by high mountains. The soil is suitable for growing grain and abounds with fruit and flowers. Here also are dragon-holes, fragrant mounds and medicinal plants. . . . The people wear leather doublets and clothes of white linen. They are light and frivolous, of a weak, pusillanimous disposition . . . handsome but given to cunning. There are both heretics and believers.

XUANZANG, *Buddhist Records of the Western World,* AD 646[1]

The young man watched intently as the brown-robed foreign monk dipped his brush in ink and traced out a complex pattern on a square of rough paper. The monk waited for the ink to dry before giving the paper to the young man with careful instructions. He must make copies and burn them on a certain day each month while reciting a spell. The young man handed over a cup of grain and pushed his way out through the crowd milling around the table.[2] He had come to the monk because his hair had started to fall out a few months before. He had already paid a local herbalist for a

remedy—juice from pounded watermelon leaves that had to be rubbed into the skin—and he had also tried head massage, but neither had worked.[3] He had come to the temple fair that morning in the hope of finding a more effective cure.

It was 870, and the monk was a Kashmiri called Chudda.[4] He had been practicing medicine in the Tarim town of Dunhuang for nearly fifteen years, living in the monastery next to the cliff s twelve miles outside the town. On this day, he had set up his stall at another monastery in the center of the town, a small establishment with only a score of monks living in the small wooden rooms lining the perimeter walls.[5] They had reserved the best sites by the small wooden gateway, selling scrolls, paintings, small booklets, and prayer sheets offering "protection against all conceivable misfortunes."[6] Townspeople and visitors wandered in and out of the monastery, stopping to light incense sticks to the two guardian warrior statues protecting the gate, and then idled along looking at the many stalls lining the main path and spilling out into the adjoining marketplace. Other monks, local and itinerant, offered various methods of divination. One of the most popular would give those who consulted him a tube containing several long wooden sticks that they shook until one of the sticks worked its way loose. Each stick was inscribed with a cryptic line of characters, only intelligible to the master at the stall, who would consult his manual before pronouncing its meaning. Others offered the interpretation of dreams and strange events, of hexagrams or of physiognomy. Then there were the almanac readers. Almanacs were on sale everywhere and, though the Chinese emperor had forbidden their ownership by individuals, many people possessed one.[7] Few, however, were sufficiently skilled or literate enough to decipher their cryptic messages, and they willingly paid the diviner for his interpretation.

The brown-robed monk was not the only one offering medical services. There were herbalists with small piles of

dried flora and fauna laid out on a cloth in front of them, acupuncturists, palmists, doctors who were expert in reading the pulses, masseurs, surgeons, children's doctors, and both Buddhist and Daoist exorcism specialists.[8] If none of these remedies worked, the afflicted could pay a scribe to copy a Buddhist scripture, to which was added an appeal to Buddha. Alternatively, they might recite a prayer designed for the purpose or pay for it to be read during a Buddhist service, or make offerings of incense and fruit.

The drugs on sale came from far and wide: the traditional medicines of Greece, Arabia, Persia, India, Tibet, and China were all on offer in Dunhuang. Indeed, an official Chinese *materia medica* of this period listed no fewer than 850 drugs, with detailed instructions on their preparation and administration.[9] However, medicine was not confined to the administration of herbal remedies. There were schools of acupuncturists, pulse readers, and masseurs. In India, an operation for cataracts had been developed, and Greek and Persian doctors were famed for operations on the brain.[10] There was even a handbook that advised Chinese magistrates how to conduct post-mortems in cases of suspicious death—instructing them, for example, on how to differentiate between someone who had drowned or had died before entering the water.[11]

Spells, charms, and exorcism were an essential part of most traditions (see figure 18). A Chinese cure for possession by demons called for pulverized cinnabar and realgar, roasted croton seed, root of hellebore and aconite, arsenphyrite burned for half a day in the earth, and a broiled centipede, with feet removed (requiring some dexterity!).[12] The resulting mixture was sieved and mixed with honey to form small pills. The patient was advised to take one pill daily, with an additional dose at midnight if the symptoms were not relieved, and to avoid "pork, cold water, and fresh bloody meat" during the treatment.

FIGURE 18. Charm for ensuring order in the house, from a ninth-century printed almanac. (The British Library, Or.8210/P.6. Drawing by author.)

Chudda had entered his local Buddhist monastery in the Himalayan kingdom of Kashmir as a child, many years before, taking the full precepts—the vows of abstinence—to become a fully ordained monk in his twenties. By the ninth century, most of northern India, home to Buddhism, had been conquered by Turkic and then Hindu dynasties, and Buddhism was in decline. The rulers of Kashmir, the Karkota dynasty, were Hindus but were tolerant of Buddhism.13

Like many Buddhist monks, Chudda had only a little learning and no inclination to become a great scholar. Nor was he particularly interested in ideological or philosophical questions. Joining the monastery was not a great act of faith but simply something one did, a way of life. Not that Chudda was without faith: he kept his vows and attended all the services. He had heard from itinerant monks who had traveled to China that there, when the mood in the chanting

hall became intense, some monks mutilated themselves in the name of Buddha, searing the flesh on their arms or burning a finger until only the stump was left.[14] Chudda was puzzled by this practice because he had been taught that Śākyamuni rejected the extreme acts of the Hindu ascetics, but there were also many stories of Buddha in his previous reincarnations mutilating his own body to help others. In one of the most famous, Buddha threw himself from a cliff in order to provide a tiger with food for her starving cubs. And a chapter of *The Lotus Sutra*, a popular text, described how a follower burned himself to death in honor of Buddha: "Anyone who follows his example—even if he only burns a finger or toe—he shall exceed one who offers a country, a city, wife or children, or even all the lands, mountains, forests, rivers, ponds and precious objects as offerings."[15]

Self-mutilation in all religions is sometimes motivated by baser desires. For instance, seeking distraction from his lust, a contemporaneous European Christian monk burned each of his fingers in turn over the flames of a candle.[16] Chudda himself had heard of a Chinese Buddhist monk severing his penis. The monk had written that he had done so to make himself undesirable to women, rather than to curb his own desires.[17] Buddha had easily resisted the temptations sent to distract him during his final meditation under the Bo tree, but not all monks and nuns found a celibate life easy. The castrated Chinese monk later attracted crowds of thousands to his sermons, though whether it was his eloquence or their curiosity that drew them is not recorded.

Salacious stories about illicit relations between monks and nuns circulated widely. The *Poetical Essay on Supreme Joy,* an eighth-century Chinese handbook on sex, contained a chapter on monasteries that recounted tales of homosexual monks and of nuns who slept with "tall foreign monks with big cocks and shaved heads."[18] Illustrated versions were doubtless also available.

Chudda had heard many such tales of Central Asia and China. Two centuries previously, the famous Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang had stayed in Kashmir for two years on his way to India to gather Buddhist scriptures.19 Xuanzang was impressed by the level of debate in Kashmir, and he collected texts on logic to take back to China. There were now other Chinese monks in residence in the Kashmiri monastery, and Chudda had learned to speak and write a little of their strange language. He had long wanted to travel, and in the spring of 855 he decided to make a pilgrimage to Mount Wutai, over 500 miles northeast of the Chinese capital, Chang'an.20

Wutai was the home of a famous bodhisattva, one who, though on the verge of enlightenment, delayed leaving this world in order to help others.21 The bodhisattva of Mount Wutai, Manjuśrī, was able to appear in whatever form he chose, and, because immense benefits accrued from simply seeing him, pilgrims flocked there keen to interpret anything unusual as a sighting, whether it be a strange cloud, a bizarre animal, a beggar encountered on a mountain path, or Buddha himself. The kingdom of Kashmir had been in conflict for several years, and Chudda had vowed to dedicate his pilgrimage to peace and the flourishing of Buddhism in his country.22 Once he had made his decision, he was inundated with requests from fellow monks. Some wanted him to carry letters to their friends and fellow countrymen along the route; others wanted copies of certain sutras, jade rosary beads, or silk cloth; still others asked for souvenirs from Mount Wutai.

It was over 3,000 miles to the Chinese capital and over 500 more to Mount Wutai, and Chudda did not expect to be back for several years.23 His servant, a young novice from a poor local family, asked to accompany him. Chudda arranged horses for them both and two pack ponies for their luggage. They would seek food and lodging in monasteries or in the

homes of lay believers, but they had to carry fodder for the horses, some money for incidental expenses, and extra clothes for the mountain crossing.24 He also packed a medicine chest of herbs and charms and a small bronze Buddha for a portable shrine.

Chudda had decided against traveling through Tibet to the northeast of Kashmir, though many former pilgrims had done so in the past. The last Tibetan emperor had been assassinated in 842, and the country was still unsettled.25 There were three main routes out of Kashmir to Central Asia, all with gates and guards. The quickest route to the Silk Road was through the north gate to the Gilgit river valley, but Chudda rejected this in favor of the western gate.26 This would take him through the ancient kingdoms of Gandhāra and Udyāna to the west and northwest of Kashmir, countries in which Buddha himself had lived in his former reincarnations.

It was late spring when Chudda and his servant left the monastery and headed west through the orchards of apricots up the Jhelum valley. The marshes and mountain slopes were covered in new grass and flowers—water-lilies, edelweiss, yellow gentian, martagon lilies, and cyclamen—and the pilgrims could see the capital city (near present-day Srinagar) spread out below them on either bank of the river. It was only one day's journey from their monastery to the swampy Wular lake, and from there the valley narrowed to a gorge, the fruit trees giving way to forests of fir and silver birch. Chudda stayed the night on the banks of the river at the monastery at Huskara.27 The next day he left his homeland through the stone frontier gate. All of Chudda's papers were in order, and the Kashmiri guards allowed him and the servant to pass without any delay. From the gorge gate at Baramulla, it was five days' journey along the Jhelum river to what is now Muzaffarabad, and another couple of days across the Jhelum-Indus watershed to the Punjab, the

route of the present-day Karakorum highway.

The road led south out of the high mountains and then turned west to Taxila.28 The city and the land around it had come under the control of the Hindu-ruled Kashmir but had an illustrious history of their own. In the fifth century BC, Taxila had been the site of a famous university offering courses in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and other subjects.29 In the fourth century, Alexander the Great passed through on his way south to India, stopping to talk philosophy with the locals.30 But it was in the third century that Taxila's importance as a Buddhist site began, with the succession of Aśoka in 272 BC as king of the Mauryan dynasty whose lands included both Taxila and Kashmir. After his conversion to Buddhism following a particularly bloody battle, Aśoka had spent his reign proselytizing and had erected stone inscriptions throughout his country in the local languages urging religious tolerance, the foundation of hospitals for both humans and animals, and the cultivation of medicinal plants.31 Aśoka also disinterred the ashes of Buddha, who had been cremated and buried in eight stupas, or shrines, in the Ganges valley and, so tradition says, redistributed them to the main cities in his country. In Taxila, the Dharmarājikā stupa was built to house one portion of those ashes.32

After this, Taxila had many rulers, all of them tolerant of Buddhism, until the city was invaded and destroyed twice, in the third and fifth centuries AD, by nomads from the north. The monasteries and stupas were burned, the monks were killed or fled, and the country did not recover its former glory. Chudda had heard from traveling monks of the decline of Buddhism in the countries west of Kashmir, but he was still surprised at the number of ruins in and around the city. Of the fifty monasteries and stupas that had surrounded Taxila in its heyday, only a few were still occupied.

The original small stupa at Taxila holding the Buddha's

ashes had been enclosed within a much larger stupa in the second century AD. It was plastered and covered in gold. Surrounding it were numerous other votive stupas and monastery buildings, but most were in ruins. The gold leaf from the main stupa had flaked away, and the decorative statues of Buddhas and bodhisattvas had been decapitated and mutilated. The friezes around the stupa narrated episodes from Buddha's life, and Chudda walked around clockwise (so as to keep his right, or clean, hand next to the stupa) in silent worship. He made an offering of fruit and incense, and draped a silk banner on the stupa itself. He would do this hundreds of times at hundreds of sites on his pilgrimage.

The road now led northwest into the Indus valley at Hund and thence back into the mountains, passing rock inscriptions left by Aśoka on the banks of the Makam river, and over the Malakand pass to the Swat river.33 This valley country of Udyāna was now ruled by Turkic Hindu kings from the north. They had built great forts on promontories overlooking the river.34 Monsoon rains fed the vines and fruit trees that grew in abundance in the lower part of this valley, and in autumn it was carpeted with purple saffron crocuses.

A community of Buddhist monks still lived in the valley, but they were nothing in number compared to earlier times: Xuanzang, the seventh-century Chinese pilgrim monk, had already noticed a decline, noting that previously there had been 1,400 monasteries and 18,000 clergy.35 In the eighth century, Padmasambhava, a monk born in the valley, had been invited to Tibet by the emperor. (Today he is known as Guru Rinpoche and is seen as the founder of the Nyingma sect of Buddhism, called the Red Hat sect because of their distinctive clothing.)36 Padmasambhava had passed through Kashmir, and some of the monks there still followed his teachings.

By the time Chuddha reached the Swat river, the active monasteries numbered in the hundreds rather than thousands (see figure 19). Chudda and his servant, therefore, did not always find lodgings in Buddhist monasteries or Buddhist households but had the consolation of visiting many sites related to Buddha's lives. In fact, there were so many sites that sometimes the pilgrims' whole day would be spent in circumambulation and worship. As they traveled on north through the Swat valley, they made frequent deviations into the mountains to visit special sites, such as that commemorating the place where Buddha turned himself into a serpent to feed the starving populace, or where he used his skin as paper and his bone as a pen in order to write the Buddhist law.37 Chudda had heard of manuscripts in Chinese monastery libraries that were written in emulation of Buddha using a bone as a pen and with blood for ink.38

As the road continued to the upper reaches of the river, the forests of pine and fir gave way to barren, rocky slopes. Often the pilgrims would see carvings of Buddha on the bare rock of the mountainside far above them, made by earlier pilgrims.39 Further on lay two sites that the pilgrims were eager to visit: the rock where Buddha dried his clothes, and another rock showing Buddha's footprints.40 It was now only a few days' journey to the confluence of the two rivers that formed the Swat, and the mountains opened out into a small plateau, 2,000 feet above sea level and fertile and cool. They continued up as the river narrowed to the watershed, where there was a small lake.41 It was home to the tutelary god of Udyāna, Nāga Apalala, a semi-human serpent. Before his conversion to Buddhism, every summer the Nāga would send great white waters down the river to take the crops. After he accepted the true faith, he only took the crops every twelve years, leaving them to the people for the other eleven.42

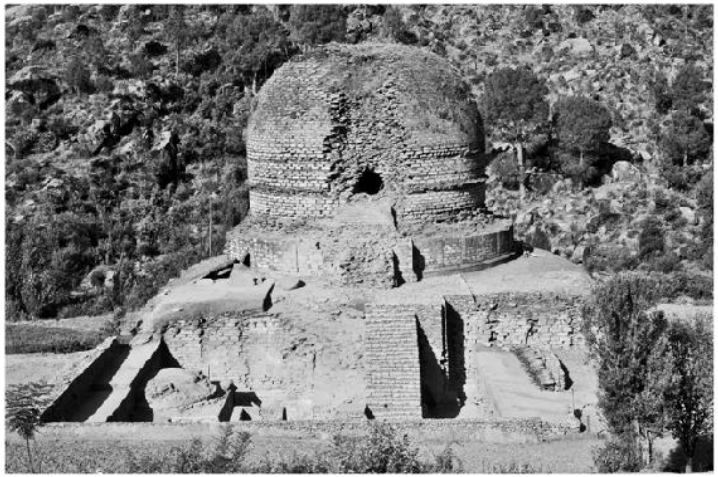

FIGURE 19. The sacred area and main stupa of Amluk-dara in the Swat valley. (Courtesy of Italian Archaeological Mission/ACT Project. Photo by Edoardo Loliva, ACT/ISCR.)

The story was familiar to Chudda. Kashmiri legends told of many other Nāgas, including one called Suśravas. The man appointed to guard the farmers' fields in Suśravas's homeland was an ascetic who had previously made a vow never to eat any of the fields' produce. This made things difficult for the Nāga, as he was not allowed to take the produce unless the field watcher broke his promise. Consequently, the Nāga and his two beautiful daughters were reduced to eating grass seeds to avoid starvation.43

One day a young nobleman went to Suśravas's pond to rest, and he happened upon the Nāga's daughters. The sound of their ankle bracelets alerted him to their presence, but it was their eyes that drew his attention. They were highlighted with a line of antimony that, the storytellers said, "appeared to play the part of a stem to the ruby lotuses of their ear ornaments." The young man was smitten. He shared his porridge with them, and they invited him to meet their father. The Nāga explained his problem to the young man, who promised to help. While the field watcher was diverted from his cooking, the young man clandestinely dropped fresh corn

from the fields into his bowl of food. The field watcher ate it unsuspectingly. The Nāga was then free to steal the crops, which he did by sending down a great hailstorm to crush them.

As a token of gratitude, the young man was offered one of the Nāga's daughters in marriage. They lived in great happiness until the local king, on seeing the young woman, was overcome with passion "like an elephant in rut." After several failed attempts to win her by persuasion, he sent soldiers to carry her away by force. While the soldiers attacked the front of their house, the young man and his wife fled through the back door to her father's palace. The Nāga was so furious at the king's behavior that he sent down a rain of fearful thunderbolts to burn the king, his palace, and most of his subjects. The Nāga's sister, Ramavyā, even came out from her mountain retreat with great piles of stones to assist her brother in his destruction. Hearing of his success before she arrived, she dumped her stones on the villages where she stood. The place is still called the forest of Ramavyā.

The Nāga was so remorseful at what he had done and weary of the reproaches of the people that he left the scene of his carnage at dawn the following day. For his new home, he created a lake of dazzling whiteness resembling milk on a distant mountain, and his daughter and son-in-law lived at a neighboring lake.

Chudda and his servant had been traveling since late spring, and now it was summer. In fact, the whole journey from Kashmir to Kashgar through the northern gate into the Gilgit and Hunza valleys could be achieved in less than a month with the right weather and fit ponies, but Chudda had chosen a slower route and made numerous excursions to holy sites. Now that they had left the Buddhist pilgrimage sites behind, Chudda was eager to cross into the Tarim basin before the onset of winter. But they still had several mountain passes to negotiate.

They made their way down from the lake into the Panjkora valley and then up to its watershed with the Yarkun river.[44] The road became more precipitous, winding its way through gray-brown peaks of jagged rock and across scree slopes. The locals told them that it was six days across the pass to the Yarkun valley and that no supplies were available on the route.[45]

The pilgrims hired another horse to carry extra fodder and provisions, and they prayed for safe passage, but even their prayers could not prepare them for the sheer drop of snow on the other side when they reached the head of the pass. Fearful of rock and snowfalls, they descended slowly, glad of the local pony who was accustomed to such terrain. But Chudda continued to pray and hold his rosary beads, and they all descended safely.

The fertile Yarkun valley supported grain, vines, and fruit trees, and a patch of flat land was marked out as a polo field next to every village. But the dried fruits from the previous year's crop were small and sour compared to those in the monsoon-fed Swat, and above the green ribbon running along the valley floor were only bare, brown slopes. The villagers lived in houses that were dug into the ground to protect them against the bitter winter winds blowing down the valley, their only entrance a hole through the roof.

The Yarkun valley led northeast to its headwaters in the mountains between the Baroghil and Darkhot passes, near the site of Seg Lhaton's battle in the Pamir mountains.[46] From there, the pilgrims intended to turn north, taking the road over the Baroghil pass to Sarhad and then across Amu Darya and over the Pamir to the Silk Road, thus retracing one of the routes taken by General Ko's army from China when he marched to attack the Tibetans in 747.

The road was busier now, and the pilgrims met travelers with news from the Tarim basin that Khotan was newly taken

from the Tibetans by local forces offering allegiance to the Chinese emperor and that the road into China had been reopened, though it was not always safe: the Tibetans still controlled some of the towns in the east, and Uygur soldiers were abroad.47 The Uygurs had been driven out of their land by the Kirghiz a decade before, and many had fled south, establishing communities in several of the oasis towns, most especially Kocho to the north and Ganzhou to the east. Their relations with the Chinese had deteriorated since the Sino-Uygur war of 843 and the subsequent persecution of their countrymen in Chang'an.

The pilgrims pressed on. Some parts of the Yarkun valley were not passable during summer when the river flooded the road, and the upper reaches of the valley were particularly treacherous. The pilgrims and their horses suffered from the cold and altitude, and, in those places where the trail following the river was flooded, they were forced to negotiate the paths hanging from the gorge. Such paths, or rafiks, were made of twigs and brushwood laid on a foundation of either layers of stones or wooden posts fixed into holes in the rock face.48 The gorges were dark, damp, and cold, hardly penetrated by the sun. It was only fifty miles to the start of the Baroghil pass road, but it took them over a week to reach. Supplies were low, and they needed to press on. To cross the pass itself took another two days, past the fort built following Tibetan successes in this region a century before, and descending to Sarhad in the Amu Darya valley. The Pamir rose ahead of them. This range was the last mountain obstacle before the descent into the Tarim basin and the desert road to China.

Even though it was now summer, the mountain landscape was desolate. The green flush that arrived with the spring and cloaked the mountain slopes had faded, and the mulberries and poplars that grew in the high valleys had not yet acquired their brilliant orange and red autumnal colors.

The pale green of their leaves was lost among the unrelenting brown-gray earth of the valleys. The pilgrims' only companions on their trek over the high passes were marmots and mountain goats, but as they descended below the snow line to the summer grazing grounds, they met Turkic sheep and yak herders. The pilgrims were always treated hospitably and were invited into the herders' tents and offered sheep and yak curd. Farther down the valley were terraced fields, some only a few feet wide, perched on the still steep slopes, but the villages and towns on the valley floors were poor places, with little food to offer travelers.

The pilgrims had one more pass to negotiate before reaching the valley leading down into the desert. The summer grazing grounds on the southern side of the Kilik pass were called the Milky Plain because they were rarely completely free of snow.[49] The pilgrims made their last camp here and then, as usual, set off at dawn before the sun rose and melted the top crust of ice. The ground widened up to the snow-covered flat saddle of the pass, where a jagged peak to the east cast a shadow on the snow. It took another two hours down through softening snow to reach flat ground suitable for a camp, but when they got there, still at an altitude of nearly 14,000 feet, the temperature was so low that they decided instead to press on. After three more hours, they descended into a grassy valley dotted with the tents of Turkic herders.

The valley then turned north and broadened out in its approach to Tashkurgan, the capital of the Pamir kingdom of Sarikol, on the southwest edge of the Tarim. The snowy peaks to either side receded slightly. It was a pleasure after so many days among the rocky defiles of the high Pamir to be in this warm, fertile valley with gentle slopes covered in flowers and herbs. Chudda saw several plants he did not recognize, and he tried to discover from the herders what they were. With no language in common, the herders

managed to explain with elaborate sign language various uses of the plants. These seemed to be medicinal, and Chudda took specimens so that he could find out more about them later.

Tashkurgan now lay only two days' away, but first they had to ford a river in summer spate. It proved difficult to find a place to cross, and by the time the monks and their ponies reached the opposite bank, they were thoroughly drenched. They continued on to the town. Tashkurgan was built on a square rocky crag about a third of a mile in length.[50] It contained a Chinese fort on the side nearest the river, and there were soldiers at a checkpoint questioning all arrivals. Chudda showed them letters from his monastery and his official travel documents from Kashmir, but he was told that he would have to request permission to travel in China. The soldier directed the pilgrims to a monastery in the town where they could stay while the necessary papers were being prepared.

The town stood 10,000 feet above sea level, and only grain and pulses grew in the surrounding fields. Other provisions were brought in by army suppliers and by traders. The monastery had its own small area of sheltered ground where various herbs and the few vegetables that could endure the high altitude and short summer were grown.

After several days, the monks received permission to continue their journey. Their next destination, the kingdom of Khotan, lay to the east, but first they had to head northward to emerge from the mountains at Yangi-hissar on the road from Kashgar through Yarkand to Khotan. After a day following the river, the valley debouched onto a great slope of gravel, several miles across. To the northwest, they could see the snowy peaks of the Mustagh-ata among the continuation of the Pamir northward. The Chinese called these the "Onion Mountains." But when Chudda awoke the next morning and looked for the mountains to the south and

west, they had disappeared in a haze.

From Yangi-hissar it was a two-week journey to the capital of Khotan along a well-traveled road, but, once they left the oasis, the landscape was completely alien to these mountain-born pilgrims. The sands were the same gray-yellow as the mountains they had just left, but there was an almost total absence of vegetation and no sight of the familiar snowy peaks that had accompanied them from Kashmir. Their bodies had grown acclimatized to the high mountain air and the bitter winds, but here the heat was searing, without any hint of a breeze. The sands stretched into the distance, punctuated only by great mounds of tamarisk. Both Chudda and his servant were quiet, praying to Buddha and fingering their rosary beads beneath their robes. In the mountains, the scenery had changed with each bend in the road, but on some desert stages there was nothing new to see for hour after hour.

The road seemed endless, but in the mid-afternoon they finally arrived at a small oasis. The sight of a man sitting by the side of the road in the shade of the first tree they had seen since the morning, surrounded by melons and large pots of water, was an immense relief. The next day, the road to Yarkand straggled along through similar small oases, and both pilgrims felt more sanguine about their ability to survive the desert stages. But they had not yet encountered the worst.

At Yarkand, they found a caravan of Sogdian merchants on their way to Khotan to buy jade, and they decided to join it. They would have to travel more slowly because the caravan’s pace was dictated by the camels, but at least the merchants were familiar with the desert. The pilgrims soon settled into the desert routine, though traveling at night to avoid the summer heat meant they saw little of the road or landscape. Immediately after sunset, the cameleers would don their heavy sheepskin coats as the temperature fell suddenly.

However, a merchant would occasionally point out a Buddhist shrine, and the pilgrims would light incense and make a small offering. They usually found a small community of monks in the hamlets where the caravan rested during the day.

The final stages of the journey to the Khotan capital were through a series of oases. The road was lined with willow and poplar, and though it was dark the pilgrims could see the shadows of fruit trees in the orchards to either side. Several hours from the city, they crossed the Kara-kash river on a small ferry. The river was swollen with summer floodwater, and it took a long time to negotiate all the animals and their cargo onto the ferry and safely across. The caravan approached the city as dawn was breaking. The haze that usually hung in the air had not yet formed, and the morning was clear, so that the tall brick and mud walls of Khotan were visible from a considerable distance.

The city was situated between two rivers, the Kara-kash and the Yurungkash, which flowed northward from the Kunlun mountains. Beyond it, the rivers merged and their combined waters, the Khotan river, continued for some time into the desert sands before going underground. During the spring and summer floods, when the ice melted on the Kunlun peaks, the waters briefly filled the dry river bed, but they disappeared as quickly as they had come, their passage recorded only by the shrubs and low trees that grew in their wake.

In addition to irrigating a considerable area and providing water for the local paper-making industry, the two rivers brought lumps of precious jade down from the mountains—hence their names, which mean black jade (Kara-kash) and white jade (Yurung-kash). Much of the jade went to China, where it was carved by highly skilled artisans into ritual objects and ornaments for the imperial family and the aristocracy.[51] Jade, or nephrite, is an extremely hard

material, and to shape it takes hours of grinding with fine sand and water and drills made with diamond points. Intricately carved pieces, such as hair ornaments and belt buckles, were therefore particularly prized. Khotanese jade varied in color from deep green to snowy white, the latter described as “crystallized moonlight.” Chudda knew that jade was considered an important aid to prolonging life in Chinese medicine and was ingested to purify the inner organs. He had seen Daoist healers offer what was purported to be liquid jade for sale, but he doubted whether it was genuine.

The pilgrims rested for several weeks in Khotan. The city was a lively center of Buddhism, and it was a relief to be back among such a large community of monks. There were numerous lectures to attend, and Chudda also wanted to meet some of the local monk-physicians. The pilgrims ate well in the monastery refectory, thanks to the cereals and fruit growing in abundance in the locality, and soon they had recovered from the privations of their long journey.

The monastery was a large walled institution with buildings arranged symmetrically around a north-south axis. The larger buildings—the lecture hall and main hall—were built of wood, with wooden pillars supporting the deeply raked roof with its upturned overhanging eaves. The smaller buildings and the walls were made of the ubiquitous yellow baked brick and tamped earth reinforced with tamarisk stalks. The monks’ cells were all arranged against the walls and were simply small square rooms with tamped earth floors and a window to the front (see figure 20). Chudda and his servant were accommodated in one of these.

There were many sites to see in Khotan.[52] A large statue of the Heavenly King of the North, Vaiśravana, stood to the side of the main gate through the city walls. The four Heavenly Kings, one for each point of the compass, were important figures in the Buddhist pantheon who fought against the forces of evil and were distinguishable by the

weapons they carried. Virudhaka, King of the South, carried a club; Dhrtarāstra, of the East, a bow and arrow; Virūpāksa, of the West, a sword; and Vaiśravana, of the North, a lance and a stupa. The storytellers in the marketplace told how, many centuries before, the founder of Khotan had gone to the Vaiśravana temple to pray for a son and heir. During those devotions, the head of the statue opened to reveal a baby boy. The king thanked the god and took the baby back to his palace. The baby, however, refused to eat and became weak, so the king took him back to the temple to ask advice of the Heavenly King. The ground in front of the statue split open to reveal a breast from which the baby suckled milk. From this time on, the story continued, Vaiśravana had been the Guardian King of Khotan (see figure 21).[53] He even became popular in China after the emperor sent an emissary to Khotan in 725 in search of an accurate image.[54]

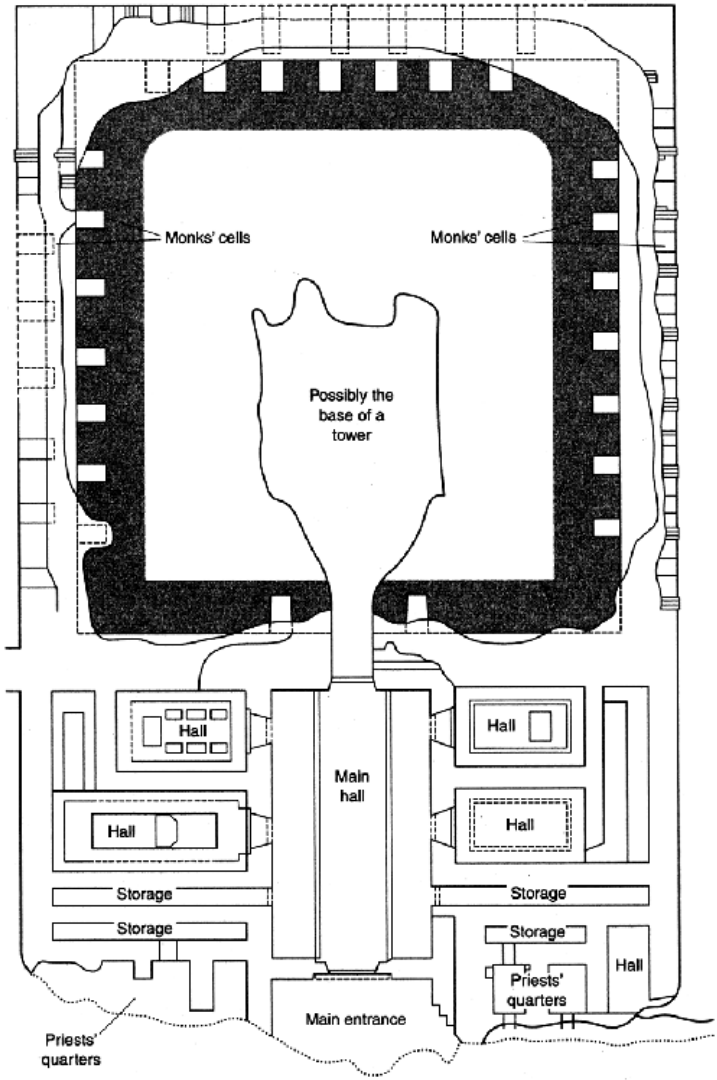

FIGURE 20. Buddhist temple at Beshbalik near Urumqi, late ninth–early tenth century. (Drawing by author after Steinhardt 1999, fig. 4.)

FIGURE 21. Vaiśravana, Heavenly King of the North, from a woodblock print made at Dunhuang, dated 947. (The British Library, Or.8210/P.8. Drawing by author.)

Many of the statues in the kingdom of Khotan were from other countries. There was even a Buddha figure with a jewelled crown from Kashmir. Another statue of Buddha, carved from sandalwood and thirty feet in height, was visited

by the sick. Cures were obtained by placing gold leaf on the area of the statue's body that corresponded to the site of the patient's own illness. The statue was said to have been carved in central India during Buddha's lifetime and then to have flown to Khotan of its own accord after Buddha's death.55 Khotan was full of stories and legends: of the rats that ate through invading nomads' bridles and so saved the country from attack; of the princess who smuggled silkworm cocoons and mulberry seeds out of China in her headdress; and of the dying town that was saved when a nobleman married the local Nāga, causing the river waters to flow again. These stories were all commemorated by monuments and paintings.

But now it was time for Chudda and his servant to move on. Once again they attached themselves to a large caravan for the journey from Khotan to Dunhuang, this time traveling by day as the worse of the summer heat had passed. The camels were loaded with Khotanese products: rugs, fine felt, gemstones, and, of course, jade. It was a large caravan, composed of several groups of merchants, and Chudda and his servant were not the only independent travelers who sought its protection. Among their companions were a Khotanese dance troop headed for a festival in Dunhuang, families traveling only a few stages to visit relatives, and several other monks.

Chudda was pleased to be with the caravan, because the road east from Khotan soon left the comfort of the oasis and entered a great desert of drifting sands whose landscape changed with every turn of the wind. The road was rarely visible under the sand, and there was no sign of water or grazing. Settlement were few, though they passed several stupas. (They were derelict, but Chudda still made offerings.) It was several weeks before they reached the ruined stupas and deserted Tibetan fort at Miran, abandoned only a decade before by Tibetans retreating south from their desert bases

when locally raised armies loyal to the Chinese regime successfully challenged Tibetan rule.56 Already the scouring sand had all but obliterated the small rooms hugging the inside of the eastern wall of the fort. Some monks and a small farming community still remained in the town, but they could barely maintain the irrigation system now that the soldiers had left . The branch canals were choked, and the desert had reclaimed the fields on their fringes, underscoring the precariousness of life in such places. Farther to the east, Chudda would encounter the ruins of many abandoned villages in the Lop desert (see figure 22). It would not be long before Miran was reduced to the same state.

FIGURE 22. Sands of the Taklamakan desert with ruins of the settlement of Kroraina, third–fourth century. (Photo courtesy of the British Library, IDP/Vic Swift, Photo 1235/3(82).)

On the third day beyond Miran, the camels suddenly stopped and knelt down, pressing their noses into the sand. The cameleer shouted to the travelers to take cover and not to move: a hot wind was approaching. Chudda and his servant were a little way behind the rest of the party, having stopped to pray at a small shrine, so they did not hear the cameleer’s cries and were unaware of the wind until it was upon them. They had encountered hot desert winds before, but never such a ferocious one. They knew that they had to cover their faces and mouths and stay where they were until the wind blew over, but there was no shelter, and they were

isolated and frightened. They both panicked and tried to gallop ahead to join the others. They could see nothing in the whirling sand; it was like a scene from hell depicted on their temple wall. At last they were forced to stop and bury themselves behind their horses, hardly able to breathe for the sand clogging their noses and throats.

After several hours, the swirling hot wind disappeared as quickly as it had arisen. It took Chudda and his servant some time to regain their senses, and then they realized that in their panic they had let go of their packhorses, which were now nowhere to be seen. The caravan had disappeared, and the landscape had changed. They took turns to search, but night was falling. The great dunes of sand, over a hundred feet high, took all their effort to climb, and from the top all they could see were more dunes. Eventually they found their packhorses, but by then it was dark, and they could only set up camp and stay where they were. Luckily, they both still had their water containers and some provisions.

The next day and for several days after, they had little choice but to follow the sun to the east. Struggling across range upon range of dunes, without sign of water or life, they came across plenty of reminders of their own mortality in the form of bleached bones littering the sand. Chudda could not tell whether the bones were one or one hundred years old, or from man or beast, but he tried not to think about them. He felt responsible for their own predicament, and he calmed the fears of his servant with prayers. After three days, they ran out of water, and then one of their horses became too weak to continue and they had to leave it to die. The other two were also near collapse. Chudda’s servant became delirious and kept trying to run off in response to calls from the desert spirits. Chudda had been warned about these and their baleful influence, and he held his servant back, until both men were so weak that there was no need. Chudda called constantly upon Avalokiteśvara—the bodhisattva who

hears the cries of the world—to save them. Finally, with only one horse left, they could go no further. The servant collapsed into a fitful sleep. Chudda set up a small shrine with his statue of Buddha and a prayer sheet from his remaining possessions. For two days he prayed, fingering his rosary and falling in and out of consciousness.

When he saw figures approaching, he thought they must be mirages. But then they spoke and offered him water. He pointed to his servant, but it was too late: the man had died. The last horse was dead and was left behind. Chudda was helped onto a new horse, the body of his servant and what remained of their belongings were loaded onto a camel, and the caravan continued. He did not remember much of the next few days, but when he was fully conscious again, the caravaneers told him that he had been barely two hundred feet from the main path, albeit hidden in the lee of a sand dune. They had come across him by luck when one of the party spotted the remains of a bundle of incense he had left on top of a dune.

Chudda was extremely relieved to reach the city of Dunhuang. He had lost almost everything, but he was most distraught about the death of his servant, for the young man had been his responsibility, and in traveling together they had become close. Now, before continuing his journey, he wanted to spend his time in prayer. He arranged a cremation and gave what little money he had left to the abbot for prayers to be said for the dead man and for the animals that had died in his charge. He also decided to have a sutra copied to dedicate to the servant and was fortunate enough to meet a scribe who was suffering from stomach pains and agreed to do the work in exchange for a charm. The sutra was dedicated not only to his dead friend but also to all sentient beings in the universe. Finally, he wrote a letter explaining his servant’s death and gave it to a monk traveling to Khotan. Monks regularly communicated by sending letters

with pilgrims, and Chudda had little doubt that his missive would be passed from pilgrim to pilgrim until eventually it reached his monastery in Kashmir.

A few months later, Chudda set out to complete his pilgrimage. He had had doubts about the wisdom of continuing.57 The monks at Dunhuang had told him of the terrible persecution of Buddhism in China a decade before in 845, when hundreds of thousands of monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life, and thousands of Buddhist establishments were closed.58 The persecution was as much for economic as for ideological reasons: the Chinese treasury needed money, and Buddhist monasteries were tax-exempt. The return to lay life by a large number of clergy greatly increased subsequent tax revenues, and many thousands of copper Buddhist statues were melted down and minted into coins. However, the persecution was also part of a turning inward of the Chinese state, a process in development since the rebellion of Rokshan a century before. Fortunately, the emperor responsible for the desecration died in the following year, and his successor proved more tolerant. Some of the monks and nuns forced to return to lay life had now returned to their monasteries, but many more monasteries remained deserted and were falling into disrepair.

Chudda's renewed enthusiasm for his pilgrimage had been kindled by the sight of paintings of Mount Wutai in the cave-temples outside Dunhuang.59 Before setting out, he dedicated the visit to his servant and offered prayers on his behalf, his original vow to pray for his country's peace forgotten.

Chudda noticed little of the landscape on his journey into China. He took care to stay with the main party at all times as they passed through the narrow strip of land between the mountains and desert, and thence across the low pass into the great plains of central China.

Reaching the city of Chang'an, Chudda stayed only as long as it took to get permission to visit Mount Wutai, and then he joined a party of pilgrims. They left by the city's northeastern gate, the same through which Princess Taihe had passed on her journey north fifty years before, and through which she had returned just before the Buddhist persecution.60 His fellow pilgrims were Chinese monks. Several of them were not very strict in their observances, regularly eating after midday and being none too fussy about what they ate either. Moreover, the monks at the monastery where he had stayed did not eat together, nor did the monastery provide their food, except for special feasts.

Chudda did not enjoy his travels through China. There was a mood of depression in the countryside, caused by the increasing tax burden imposed by a weak government. Chudda and his fellow pilgrims often found it difficult to get lodgings on their journey north. They were even turned away from monasteries whose rooms were already all occupied by rent-paying merchants and military men. At one place, the monks ran inside at their approach, and no amount of knocking would get them to open the gate. At another they were chased away with brooms.61 Often they had to rely on the hospitality of local lay believers, and even this was not always forthcoming. At one village, after trying twenty houses, Chudda finally had to force his way in, and even then the host refused to feed him.62

The land of loess through which he now traveled was heavily eroded by rain and river water, and divided by great chasms. The towns and villages along the way were poor, and he heard many complaints about the double tax levied to pay for the soldiers sent to quell the many rebellions in the south. When they reached Taiyuan, the nearest large town to Mount Wutai, Chudda realized that Buddhism had not been the only faith to suffer under the previous emperor. The Manichaean temple was in ruins, and the few remaining Uygurs in the

town spoke of the terrible persecution of their countrymen in the Chinese capital.63 Two years after the Uygurs had been driven from their lands, their remaining armies were massacred in a battle against the Chinese at the border northeast of Taiyuan. The Chinese chief minister had then ordered the round up of Manichaean clergy in Chang'an. The monks and nuns were forced to dress in dark Buddhist robes and had their heads shaved as a sign of humiliation. (Manichaean clergy traditionally dressed in white and did not cut their hair.) Rumors spoke of over seventy nuns being killed and of the rest of the monks and nuns being sent into exile, and Manichaean texts were burned in the streets. The persecution against Buddhists started only two years later.

When the emperor died, a rebuilding program was started, but the new emperor insisted that the monasteries be renamed to symbolize his secular authority. Even now, a decade later, Buddhism had still not regained the confidence of former years.

Mount Wutai, or Five Terraces, is so called because of its five flattened peaks that lie some 9,000 feet above sea level. Monastery complexes had been built on the peaks and in the surrounding depressions since at least the third century AD, and by the fifth century there were over 200 establishments. In the seventh and eighth centuries, the monasteries had flourished, attracting considerable state support and tens of thousands of pilgrims. Monks from India, Korea, and Japan were regular visitors, some staying for several years to study and leaving behind inscriptions recording their presence. In 824, the Tibetan emperor had requested a plan of Mount Wutai from the Chinese emperor.64 His request was granted, and Tibetan monks also started to make pilgrimages. The Tibetan ruling family had officially adopted Buddhism in the previous century, and, though Buddhist belief was not to become widespread in Tibet until later, the emperor initiated a monastery-building program at the time that the Swat

valley monk Padmasambhava was resident there. The main central temple of bSam yas monastery (Samya) in the Zangpo river valley in southern Tibet was built as a symbolic world mountain, flanked by temples of the sun and moon and enclosed by a circular wall symbolizing the Iron Mountains that surround the universe.65 Many Tibetan ideas for this and subsequent Buddhist buildings were based on existing temples in China, including those at Mount Wutai.

Chudda stayed at Mount Wutai for several months, visiting all the different temples, shrines, and other sites, including a famous hexagonal revolving bookcase.66 There were always sutra lectures to attend, and he was Often invited to vegetarian feasts, arranged by patrons for the monks or in commemoration of special events. He also saw an ordination ceremony where young novices took the full set of vows. He had not forgotten his own vow. He “moistened the brush” of several local artists and scribes, and the resultant paintings and sutras were all dedicated to his lost companion.67 It was deep winter when he left. The monastery buildings were covered with snow, and the countryside around seemed to reflect the desolation that filled Chudda’s heart.

His pilgrimage over, Chudda applied in Chang’an for papers to return home. In Dunhuang he heard news of the fall of the ruling Karkota dynasty in Kashmir, in the same year he had left.68 Although the new king was well spoken of, Chudda decided to wait for further reports before continuing.

Over a decade had now passed. Chudda sat patiently at his stall outside the monastery awaiting his next patient. His skills as a doctor had been in great demand in Dunhuang, and, like many before and after him, he had been seduced by the beauty of the Tarim into staying.

SEVEN

The Writer's Tale

AHMAD, 903–935

There is no rest for the one of intellect and
refinement in his locality, so leave your
homeland.
Travel, and you will find a replacement for that
which you left, and exhaust yourself for therein
is the sweetness of life.
Verily I saw water become putrid in its stagnation,
and become sweet when it flows.
And the lions would not be fierce if they didn't
leave their grounds, and the arrow would not
strike if it didn't leave the bow.
And if the sun stayed in its place in the universe,
people would have grown tired of it,
And if the moon did not disappear every now and
then, the anticipating eye would never spare it
a glance.
And raw gold is as good as the dust that covers it,
and the staff covered in dust is mere firewood.
In leaving your destiny will change, and in
emigration you will become precious, like gold.
And Allah knows.

IMAM AL-SHAFI'I, 767–820 AD / 150–204 AH[1]

AS AHMAD ENTERED THE CITY GATE of Isfahan, his heart lift ed

at the sight of the last of the fall roses.2 The flowers were also travelers, having sprouted first in the Himalayas over two thousand miles to the southeast and then spread throughout Eurasia. Ahmad's visit to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina in 903 some three decades previously had taken him the same distance in the opposite direction, across the once great Arab caliphate.3 He had returned to his home, but part of him remained in Mecca. His journey, and those of others he encountered and read, took root in his imagination.4 He had determined then to write a geography of the world.5

Ahmad was to be known by later generations by his *nisba,* his name indicating his origins, in this case the Rusta district of his home city of Isfahan— Ahmad ibn Rusta Isfahan. He loved the city and devoted a large section of his book to its architecture, history, and traditions.6

FIGURE 23. Map of the world by Al-Idrisi (1154), reconstructed by Konrad Miller, originally published/ produced in Stuttgart, 1928. (British Library, Maps.856(6).)

Isfahan is in the foothills of the Zagros mountains straddling the Zayandarud river. It was formed from two cities. The Jewish settlement in the west, Yahudiya, was probably founded in the fourth century AD, though there was a tradition saying that the first settlers were fleeing Nebuchadnezzar II's destruction of Jerusalem in the sixth

century BC. They were said to have carried soil and water from their home in Jerusalem and settled in Isfahan because the landscape most resembled their own.[7]

Before the start of the Abbasid caliphate, Yahudiya had been a small settlement a couple of kilometers distant from Gay or Sharistan, the original military garrison. This settlement was originally the larger, but the new Arab rulers rebuilt the fortress and extended the town to Yahudiya, building new walls to enclose the surrounding villages. The combined city with its synagogues, mosques, markets, and bathhouses thrived, the old Yahudiya growing in size and importance, especially after a permanent marketplace with custom-built shops and workshops was established just outside the walls.[8]

Between prayers each day, Ahmad spent many hours exploring the city before returning home to record his impressions.[9] He wrote of the great circular walls over a mile and a half in circumference, their four great gates, and a hundred towers enclosing twenty districts, Rusta among them. But as much knowledge was gained from playing chess and listening as his opponents discussed the various legends of the city. He also recorded many of these in his book, among them that of the refusal of the city's people to assist Nimrod in his rebellion against God, thus ensuring that God made the region bountiful. According to another legend, Nimrod's army was destroyed near Isfahan, and the townspeople were blessed by Abraham. Thereby, Ahmad wrote, the city will always have thirty men to whom God grants their every wish.[10]

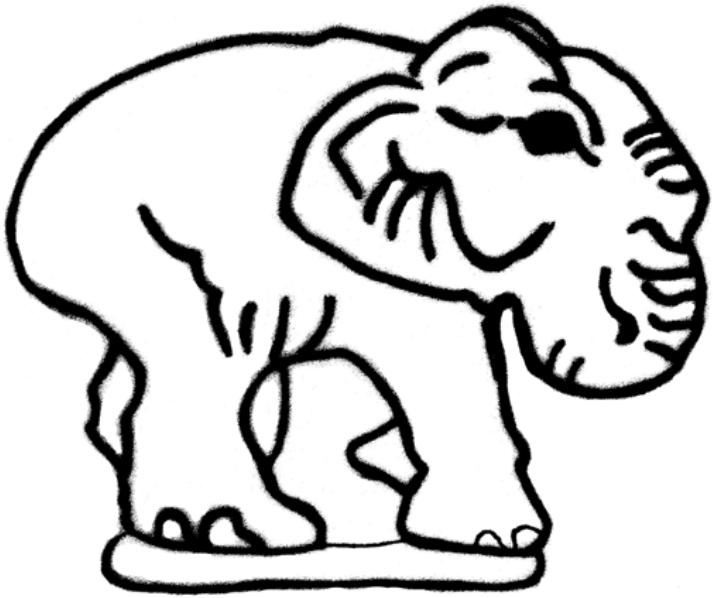

FIGURE 24. Elephant chess piece in black stone, Persian, late sixth or early seventh century. (Gustavus A. Pfeiffer Collection, New York. Drawing by author.)

Along with many of his countrymen, Ahmad was skilled at chess and backgammon. Like Isfahan's roses, these were imports from India where chess had been played for over a thousand years.11 The Persian and Arabic words for chess derived from the Sanskrit, *caturgana,* meaning an army in four divisions. Originally these were divisions of elephants, cavalry, ships, and infantry, but, by the time the game was transmitted to Persia, the fleet of ships had been replaced by a division of chariots (see figure 24). Chess and backgammon were considered to be among the skills any cultured Persian man should have, and the games were mentioned in several Persian texts, including books on manners. Among Ahmad's library was a copy of the sixth-century Persian text *The Explanation of Chess and the Invention of Backgammon,* which described how the game had first come from India in the sixth century during the reign of the Sasanian emperor Khusro I:

> It is said that during the reign of Khusro, of immortal soul, for the sake of testing the wisdom and knowledge of the Iranians and to see his own benefit, Dewisarm, great sovereign of the Indians, sent one chess set, with sixteen pieces made from emerald and sixteen pieces made from red ruby. Along with it, he sent 1,200 camel loads of gold, silver, jewels, pearls, garments, ninety elephants and goods made specially for them.12

Ahmad was an educated and curious man who read voraciously, in both Persian and Arabic. He had his own collection of books but also borrowed from others; one of his fellow scholars in the city had spent 300,000 dirhams on a library.13 The introduction of paper making into the Arab caliphate some two centuries previously had transformed scholarship.14 Books were cheaper to make and thus much more readily available.15

Ahmad had read the works of the famous astronomer from Balkh, Abū Ma'shar, and all the astronomical traditions known in Islam, including those of India, Persia, Greece, Syria, and Arabia.16 He started his own work with a summary of knowledge of the geography of the skies, following it with his account of Medina and Mecca.17 There were many descriptions of these in contemporary texts, and he had the advantage of having seen the cities himself. But for the rest of his work, he had to rely on the accounts of others and his own imaginings. Fortunately, both were plentiful.

One of his most thumbed texts was the work on administrative geography by Ibn Khordadbeh, a former director-general of post and intelligence in Baghdad, the *Kitāb al-Masālik wa'l-Mamālik* (Book of Itineraries and Kingdoms).18 In it, Ibn Khordadbeh detailed the postal routes and distances between cities, not only across the caliphate but also into the land of the Turks and Armenians as well as to the Byzantine empire, India, and China. He had

traveled widely himself but also used the accounts of other travelers met during his work. One that Ahmad found compelling was the story of Sallam and his journey to the land of the peoples of Gog and Magog.[19]

Ahmad, like many of his fellow Muslims—and Jews and Christians—believed Gog and Magog to be apocalyptic peoples who had been held back by a barrier erected by Alexander the Great—"the two-horned one" in Islamic tradition. Their release by God would be one of the signs portending the Last Day. There were numerous descriptions in contemporary literature, including that of Ahmad's contemporary, Muhammad al-Tabari, a Qur'anic commentator and historian, who described them as "nine times more numerous than human beings" and said that "no male dies before having fathered a thousand children, nor any female before having given birth to the same number."[20]

In 842, following his dream that the barrier holding back Gog and Magog had been breached, the Abbasid caliph Al-Wathiq ibn Mutasim had sent an envoy to find the barrier and to report back on the situation. The envoy, Sallam, was a Turkic interpretor to the caliph. On his return to Samarra two years later, he dictated his report to Ibn Khordadbeh.[21]

Sallam recounted how he first headed north to the Caucasus mountains, thought by many at the time to be the barrier's location: the Qur'an talks of the barrier being in the "farthest north" and describes it as closing the gap between two mountains. There were two possible candidates in this region, both known as the Caspian Gates: the Bāb al-Abwāb, controlling the route to the southwestern Caspian Sea from the Caucasus mountains at Derbent, and the Bāb al-Lān or Darial pass, controlling the route from the mountains to the north. Sallam mentions visiting the Darial pass but, not satisfied that this was the barrier, he traveled on to the capital of the Turkic Khazars to the northwest of the Caspian;

it is possible that he was himself from Khazaria.22 Not having found the gates in the north, he continued eastward across the ancient steppe route through Central Asia as far as Hami in the northern Tarim basin, then under the rule of the Turkic Uygurs.23 Here he described great gates and, assuring himself that they had not been damaged apart from a narrow crack (from which he is said to have scraped some iron dust to take back to the caliph as evidence), he returned through Balkh and Nishapur after over two years of travel.

Sallam had taken trade routes on the southern edge of the steppe that had been in use for millennia for trade, tribute, armies, migrants, and more. These routes were accessible to Isfahan through the road to Ray or by crossing the desert to the east. However, Isfahan was equally accessible by sea routes through the busy ports of the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. Ahmad heard stories from passing traders of sea merchants who had made their fortunes in India and China. A Jewish merchant from Oman was said to have returned from his voyages to China with musk worth a million dirhams, silk and porcelain of the same value, and yet more in precious stones.24 This was wealth beyond Ahmad's imagining; such riches would have enabled him to amass a great library. He followed Ibn Khordadbeh in tracing the sea routes to Champa on the east coast of present-day Vietnam. Ibn Khordadbeh described how merchants continued on from there to the Chinese ports of Khanfu (Guangzhou), Zaytun (Quanzhou), and Kantu (Yangzhou) and then to al-Sīlā (present-day Korea).25

During some periods, merchants had chosen the northern steppe or the southern sea routes to bypass the Persians and their taxes. Four centuries previously, the Byzantine emperor Justinian I tried—unsuccessfully—to establish direct trade with the Chinese through Axumite sea-merchants and the Sri Lankan market ports.26 Sogdian merchants had also chosen to ally with the Turks rather than the Persians, fellow

Iranians, to find land routes through the Caucasus that similarly avoided the Persian Sasanian empire.27 Some of the Sasanian ruling family had crossed the Pamir mountains and sought refuge in China after their defeat by the armies of the Arab caliphate, but by Ahmad's time most of the contact between the Arab and Chinese civilizations was through the sea routes. Both empires had declined in power and territory even though their respective borders extended to the edges of the Pamir and the steppe.28

At its height, the Abbasid caliphate ruled the lands from northern Africa in the west to the Pamir in the east, ruling from 762 from its capital in Baghdad. To the east, the Tang dynasty in China controlled the Tarim into eastern Central Asia from its capital in Chang'an. Both capitals had populations of one to two million at their heights. The two powers had shared a land border—and come to battle over it in 751. They also came to share technologies: paper making and silk production were now part of the Arab world.29 Like the Tang rulers, who were part Turkic, the Abbasids were also ethnically mixed.30 They had intermarried, and the caliph Al-Ma'mūn (r. 813–33), who had a Persian mother, was well aware of the rich tradition of the Persian land and its peoples: "The Persians ruled for a thousand years and did not need us Arabs even for a day. We have been ruling them for one or two centuries and cannot do without them for an hour."31

By the early ninth century, however, the caliphs had effectively ceded control of much of its empire—just as the Tang dynasty in China had lost control of the Tarim. (The Tang had fallen from power in China in 907.) The caliphate held power for several centuries more but was much reduced. Isfahan had been subject to many different rulers. Ahmad could not remember a decade without change. There was a brief period on Ahmad's return from Mecca when the Islamic Persian dynasty, the Samanids, took control. They

ruled what was formerly the eastern part of the caliphate from their Central Asian capital, Bukhara, and controlled many of the other great trading cities of Central Asia, such as Samarkand, Nishapur, Balkh, and Herat. They had declared Persian the language of the empire, though Arabic remained the language of art and science. They started minting their own silver coins, dirhams. But Isfahan was not to enjoy their protection for long. Soon, Deylami warlords from the mountains on the shores of the Caspian had taken control of the city.32

Now there was a new power, the Buyids, and Ahmad hoped that they would bring peace and stability, enabling his home city to become glorious again. They had already issued coins bearing the name of Isfahan, and building works had started, including a new city wall.33

The Buyids were descended from the Deylami on the shores of the Caspian, but their empire did not extend to their ancient homelands.34 These remained dangerous areas for travelers. Merchants sailing from the Khazar khaganate on the northern Caspian Often chose to disembark at Abaskun, a Samanid port in the southeast—even though many of them then traveled southwest to Baghdad—so as to avoid the perilous routes of the Alborz mountains. Moreover, Abaskun was the port for the region of Gorgan, famed throughout the Arab world for its silk: the veils produced here were sought after as far away as Yemen.35 Merchants also came here from Central Asia through Nishapur and Merv, bringing other goods for trade. Some merchants then took the road south to join the main route west to Baghdad, passing safely south of the Alborz mountains.

Ahmad listened to his friends recounting their travels as they sat together in the local bathhouse, or hammam. Many had done the Hajj, but others had traveled some of the different routes described by Ibn Khordadbeh. Travel was

considered essential for the Islamic scholar. In return, Ahmad told them of the roses of the Himalayas on the way southeast to India and of the deserts that Sallam encountered on his quest for the barrier of Gog and Magog. Sitting in the rest chamber after the wet heat of the hammam, they discussed whether it could possibly be hotter there than in the fierce deserts to the east of Isfahan. To the west, some of the travelers had visited the great court of the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople and the Anglo-Saxon lands of England in Europe.[36] But one of their favorite tales was Ahmad's description of his journey to the lands of the north, traveling with the Rus fur traders across the Caspian to the shores of the eastern Baltic.[37]

The traders were from Scandinavia and were well known throughout northern Europe.[38] Peoples from these lands had traveled the northern seas for centuries, trading furs and amber and raiding the islands and shores of the northern oceans, including the southeastern Baltic. Amber also came through western Europe to the Roman empire. From the eighth century, the Turkic Khazars on the lower Dneiper and Volga rivers started trading with the Byzantines and Arabs in the Crimea and Caucasus.[39]

By the end of the eighth century, silver dirhams minted by the Arab Abbasid caliphate had come to the eastern Baltic through these trading routes, brought by Khazar and Islamic merchants.[40] Although the Arabs and Khazars clashed over control of the Caucasus, they reached rapprochement by the end of the eighth century and trade increased, and thus the flow of coins. Over the next century, the Bulgars on the middle reaches of the Volga also acted as middlemen for merchants coming from Central Asia in search of furs and amber. The Vikings were already sailing to the southeastern Baltic for seasonal trade, and the growing availability of silver only increased their interest in the area. There were no silver sources in their homelands, and the metal was highly

valued.41 By the middle of the eighth century, the Vikings had reached the trading town of Staraia Ladoga on the Volkhov river, and by the early ninth century they had started settling there.42

The Vikings were sailors used to traveling on sea, lake, and river. Their shallow draft ships with both oars and sails enabled them to negotiate even quite small, fast-flowing rivers, and they soon started to follow the river trade routes south to the land of the Bulgars in search of the source of the silver.43 There was no single river south from Staraia Ladoga. First they had to follow a series of rivers upstream, rowing over the many rapids and carrying their boats between the rivers. Portage was feasible because of the lightness of their boats, made of overlapping planks split rather than sawn from mature trees, making them as little as one inch thick. The planks were held together with iron rivets and waterproofed with caulking at the overlap. Slaves carried out much of the work in rowing and dragging and carrying the boats over portages.

There were several navigable routes south—at least in the spring, when the fast flow of water covered the sand banks. The northern rivers froze in the winter, but that made it possible to travel by sleds laden with their furs. One route led to the Dneiper river and then to the Black Sea (the Sea of Rum) and Constantinople, capital of the Byzantine empire.44 Another led farther east to join the Volga river and then to the Caspian Sea (the Sea of Jurian), over 2,000 miles of river travel. It was also possible to travel between the two routes in the northern Caucasus, through the Sea of Azov and the Don river. Ibn Khordadbeh described the Rus:

> They transport beaver hides, the pelts of the black fox and swords from the farthest reaches of the Land of the European Slaves45 to the Sea of Rum. The ruler of Rum46 takes a tithe of them. . . . They travel to Khamlij, the city of the Khazars whose ruler takes a tithe of them.47 Then they betake themselves to the Sea of Jurian and they alight on

whichever of its shores they wish.[48]

Black fox fur was the most valued of all furs among the Arabs. But the Rus also supplied sable, Siberian squirrel, ermine, marten, weasel, mink, fox, and hare as well as wax and birch bark, fish teeth, honey, goat skins, horse hides, falcons, acorns, hazelnuts, cattle, swords and armor.[49]

Whenever winter approached and Ahmad brought out his furs from the north, he was reminded of this journey. He had traveled it so many times in his imagination that he had started to believe he had actually been there. He told his friends of the first sightings of the Rus men, tall, fair, and heavily tattoed. They were all well armed, with axes, daggers, and double-edged swords. The most valued swords were made by the Franks in northern Europe and acquired by the Rus, as were so many of their goods, through both trade and plunder.[50] They considered these swords the treasure of the Franks and, once they had obtained one, they were passed down to a new generation, not buried with them as were their other possessions.[51]

The Rus did not restrict plundering to Europe. They carried out raids in the Caspian in 913, arriving on 500 ships through the cross-Caucasus route from the Dneiper river.[52] The Khazars gave them safe passage in exchange for half of their spoils. The Rus raided both the Gorgan region and the lands to the west of the Caspian through the port at Baku. However, on their return across the Caspian, they were attacked by groups of Khazars, and many were killed. The survivors fled up the Volga but were then attacked and killed by the Bulgars.[53]

Ahmad’s imaginary journey, however, was accompanying the peaceful return of a group of traders through the lands of the Khazars and Bulgars.[54] They had traded their furs, amber, and slaves in Gorgan, acquiring Samanid dirhams in

return.[55] The Samanids had recently discovered new sources of silver in their territories, enabling them to increase their production of coins at their mints in Samarkand and near Tashkent exclusively for their trade with the Rus market.[56]

The Rus, their longboats loaded with silver, glass, carnelian, and silks, crossed the Caspian and entered the Volga river delta, which brought them to the capital of the Khazars at Khamlij. The Khazars had built a fortress to control the river traffic and exacted a duty on all goods before allowing the Rus further up the river.

The Khazars, Turks from the steppes northwest of the Tarim, had been pushed westward by the breakup of the western Turkic empire and the rise of the Chinese Tang dynasty.[57] They originally held onto their Turkic religious tradition with a belief in the sky god Tengri. Bordering the Byzantine empire and Arab caliphate, they were strategically placed to control this north-south trade. And they came into contact with both Christianity and Islam. Christian churches were built in Khazar lands in the Caucasus by Albanians and Armenians, and mosques in the Khazar capital served the Muslim community. But the Khazar leaders chose instead to convert to Judaism, perhaps to avoid the competing pressures from the Byzantines and Arabs.[58]

From Khamlij, the Rus continued up the Volga river into its middle reaches. The wide river meandered across the southern Russian steppe—barely climbing—making travel easy except for the sand shoals that appeared after the spring spate and could run boats aground. The Rus crossed from the land of the Khazars to that of the Bulgars. The Bulgars were another Turkic peoples who had migrated from Central Asia, originally settling in the western Caucasus. In the seventh century, they suffered attack and defeat by the Khazars. Some Bulgars became assimilated under their new ruler, and others moved either west into the Balkans or northeast to the Volga. The latter did not follow the Khazar

kagan in his conversion to Judaism; instead, they converted to Islam in the early tenth century—their cousins in the Balkans had converted to Christianity a century before.[59] The Abbasid caliph sent a mission to the Bulgars in 921, ostensibly to establish diplomatic relations and to provide teachers of Islamic law but also to investigate the possibility of direct trade, bypassing the Khazars.[60] The envoy, Ibn Fadlān, wrote a detailed report for the caliph on his return.[61]

The report described how he and his entourage first traveled west to the Samanid court in Bukhara and then in 922 headed north across the Khorezm region and into the land of the steppe pastoralists—a journey of seventy days—crossing the Emba and Ural rivers until they came to the Bulgar capital on the Volga. This was not the easiest or safest route, but it enabled them to bypass Khazar territory, and it was already being taken for the same reason by many traders.[62] The Bulgars told Ibn Fadlān that the Khazars had imposed a blockade on trade and "imposed us to servitude."[63]

Among the Bulgars, Ibn Fadlān encountered many Rus traders whom he described as "perfect physical specimens, tall as date palms, blond and ruddy."[64] But he was less impressed by their ablutions, describing them as "the filthiest of all Allah's creatures" and noting that, though they washed daily, they shared the same bowl of water. Nor, he noted, did they wash after excreting or urinating, nor after sex. This was shocking for a devout Muslim, brought up to keep one's body in a state of ritual purity. Baths were also recommended for medicinal purposes; every city district had its own bathhouses, and the rich had private hammams.[65] The bathing habits of foreigners was a lively topic for debate for Ahmad and his companions after their own cleansings in the local bathhouse.

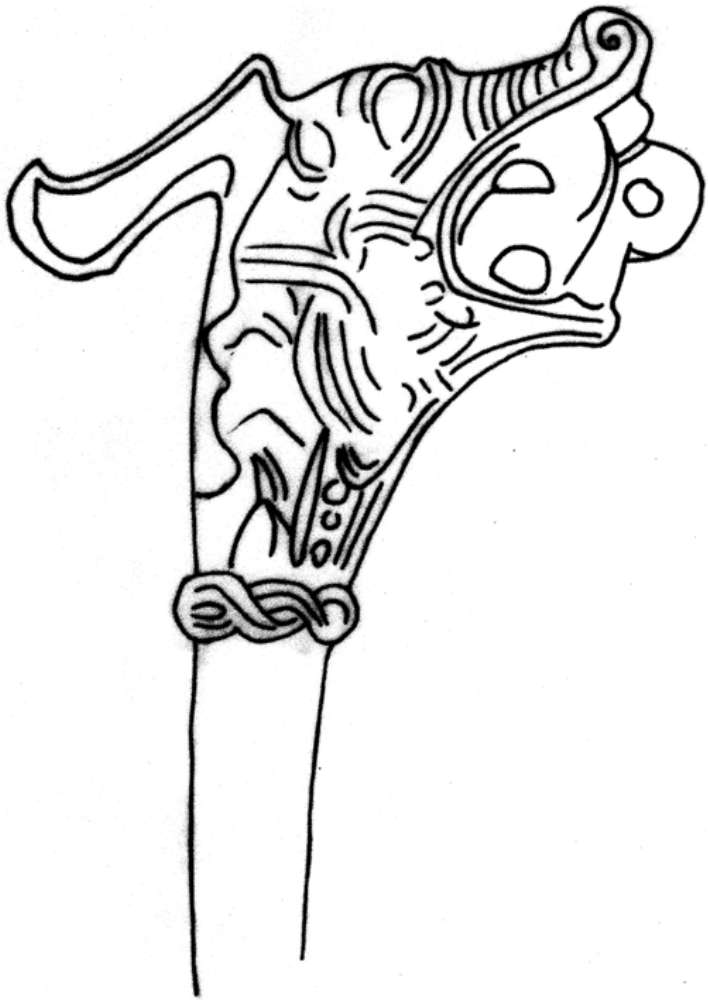

FIGURE 25. Dragon heads were often used to adorn prows of Viking ships and were also common in the design of ornaments such as this pin, tenth century. (Drawing by author after Williams et al. 2014, 50, fig. 29.)

The Rus women were walking treasuries of the family wealth, with each twisted or plaited gold neck ring representing 10,000 dirhams; some of the women had several silver and gold neck and arm rings. Their husbands wore similarly fashioned arm rings.66 The metal of the box-shaped brooch fastening their woollen shawls or overcoats also displayed their wealth, whether iron, copper, bronze, silver, or gold.67 Some were fashioned in the shape of

animals, such as a tortoise shell or a dragon's head (see figure 25). The brooch was both decorative and functional: a ring attached to it held a knife.[68] The women wore decorative colored beads of glass, silver, gemstones, and amber both as necklaces or festoons strung between the metal brooches used to fasten the shoulder straps of their outer woollen tunic.[69] The composition of the necklaces also showed their wealth. Although the amber was acquired locally and the Vikings produced their own glass beads, both were valuable. Glass was also sought from elsewhere, with the Vikings paying a dirham for a bead. Even scrap pieces were valued, to be taken by the Rus for their reworking into beads.[70] Gemstones were bought on the shores of the Caspian, having been brought by traders from mines farther south in Central Asia and northern India.

The women's accoutrements were not the only sign of a Rus trader's wealth: he also kept and traded in slaves, always a significant part of the Silk Road economy. Their slaves were acquired during raiding parties in the northern lands and were sold in the Bulgar and Khazar capitals.[71] On arriving in those cities, the Rus would make offerings of food and alcohol on the riverbank at wooden posts carved with the faces of men.[72] They would first recount all the goods they were carrying and then ask that their transactions be quick and successful. They might have to return, Ibn Fadlān notes, two or three times or even buy sheep or cows to slaughter, tying their heads to the posts, before they managed to sell all their goods.

From the land of the Bulgars, Ahmad described how he and his companions traveled northwest as the river gradually curved round. The last part of the journey involved portage across to the Baltic watershed and negotiating the rapids of the rivers on the other side, much faster flowing, until they returned to their community at Staraia Ladoga to repair their

boats and replenish their supplies of furs and other goods from local hunters.

It was getting late by the time Ahmad finished recounting his tale, and, whether because he was imaging himself in the Baltic winter or because autumn was ending, he shivered as he left the bathhouse. He wrapped his fur more tightly around him and wandered back through the streets of his beloved city, still dreaming of the lands of the north.

EIGHT

The Official's Tale

ZHAI FENGDA, 883–966

The duty of officials is to be the people's servants, not to make the people serve them. Those working on the land pay one-tenth of their income in tax towards employing local officials and they therefore want the officials to work for justice on their behalf. Officials who take their stipends yet do nothing are to be found everywhere. There are even those who neglect their jobs and also steal from the people. Suppose you hire a servant in your home and he receives his salary yet neglects his job and steals your property, you would certainly be extremely angry and punish and fire him . . . with this kind of official the principle is the same.

LIU ZONGYUAN, "Essay in Praise of Official Xie," early ninth century[1]

Zhai Fengda had just started school.[2] He sat with several other boys in a side hall in the monastery while their teacher, a young clerk in the army, gave each a brush and a piece of paper, already written on one side, and helped them grind ink. Then the teacher sat down next to Fengda and showed him how to compose the first five characters of the *Thousand Character Classic,* writing them from right to left along the

top of the paper. Fengda took the brush himself and tried to copy the characters in the space below. The first word, “thousand” 千, comprised only three strokes and was quite easy. Once satisfied that Fengda was writing the strokes in the correct order, the teacher passed to the next boy.3

Fengda’s father had already taught him the start of the *Thousand Character Classic*, and so he knew how to pronounce the words he was transcribing. The work, written in the mid-sixth century, was used as a primer in Chinese schools. Each character occurred only once, and the text’s tetrasyllabic structure and rhyme pattern made it easy to memorize. The children in the classroom were of various ages and ability; some were already copying more advanced primers, such as *Essential Teachings for the Instruction of Young People*, *The Family Teaching of Taigong*, or *The Poems of the Monk Wang*.4 In this last work, Monk Wang’s advice and tone bear a striking resemblance to those of Polonius when talking to his son in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet.* Monk Wang advises the young on their filial duties, how to deal with money, and how to act in society at large: “If you are told a secret, do not blurt it out. If you hear gossip, do not repeat it. If you see trouble, act as if you saw it not; always beware of taking too much upon yourself. Do not stand security for those who are not relations; do not act as a go-between where you have no business.”5 Following study of these primers, students moved on to the works of Confucius and other more advanced texts.

It was 890, and Fengda was just seven. His father could only read and write poorly, though he was a clerk, and his mother not at all, but they could afford to employ laborers to work their fields and servants to do the household chores, and so Fengda and his elder brother were free to attend school. His father hoped that his sons would pass the Chinese state examinations and become officials in the central government to add honor to the family name; this

would also ensure him and his wife a comfortable old age and the possibility of retiring back to their ancestral home on the central plains of China. But the news from the capital was not encouraging. When Fengda was born in 883, rebels still held Chang'an. They had only been ousted in the following year, and, though the Tang emperor was now reinstalled, no one knew how much longer he could hold onto power.

Fengda's family lived in Dunhuang, a thousand miles from Chang'an. The town had been under the de facto rule of the Zhang family since 848 when General Zhang Yichao had driven out the Tibetans.[6] Fengda's father had taken him to see a painting of the general with his victorious army on the wall of one of the caves at a Buddhist site outside Dunhuang.[7] Fengda remembered it very clearly because it was the day of the dragon festival. His mother hung a bundle of willow leaves above their door to protect against epidemics and made him and his brother wear small wooden carvings hung from their belts.[8] When Fengda asked her what they were for, she explained that they were amulets to protect them against all the demons and malevolent animals that came out on this day: toads, scorpions, spiders, centipedes, and snakes. When he asked her why they came out on this day, she explained that it was the fifth day of the fifth month. But when he asked why it was the fifth day of the fifth month, she lost patience and sent him off to play with his caged cricket while she prepared a picnic.

They were going on an outing to the cave temples, and then to Moon Lake and Rumbling Dune. The family rode on horses, Fengda sitting in front of his mother, and their servant followed on a donkey. The track that led to the cave temples, twelve miles southeast of Dunhuang, wound its way through the town and the surrounding farms and then crossed several miles of stony desert before reaching the half-mile stretch of cliff in which the caves had been

excavated. Although they had set off early with many other townsfolk, the sun was already high in the sky when they sighted the temple of the Heavenly King marking the northern end of the cave valley. Soon they were at the foot of the cliff. While they rested in the shade of the poplars growing next to a small stream, their servant prepared lunch. His mother had a new fan made out of willow wood for the festival.9

The valley was crowded with sightseers. Monks from the monastery in the valley had erected stalls outside its gate, and there Fengda and his parents had their fortunes told and bought incense. Then they set off to tour the cave temples. Several hundred caves honeycombed the cliff, far too many to see in one day, but his parents had Often visited them and had their favorites. At the Great Buddha Temple, they knelt at the foot of the enormous 100-foot-high painted statue and lit their incense.10 Fengda was fascinated, and he ran up and down the rickety wooden stairs leading up and behind the statue. Even its toe, worn clean of paint from the many thousands of hands reaching out to touch it for luck, towered over him. Then they moved on to a newly excavated cave and then to another that contained a statue of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara. His parents circumambulated the statue, giving the monk in attendance their offering of fruit, which he purified with a prayer before placing it at the bodhisattva's feet. They lit incense sticks and stuck them into a large, bronze urn filled with sand, and they draped the statue with a cotton scarf, also blessed by the monk. Finally they moved on. Fengda was bored by this time, and his parents led him along the wooden walkways and up some steps to the cave containing the painting of General Zhang after his victory over the Tibetans.

The mural was painted along the lower register of the left-hand wall of the cave. General Zhang, dressed in a red silk gown, sat astride a large white charger led by two grooms.

The way ahead was being cleared by four of his attendants, two of whom held large blue umbrellas to shade him when he arrived. The road itself was lined with mounted soldiers: first two pairs of drummers, holding large barrel drums under their left arms; then two pairs of horn players, heralding the general's approach with their long, blue-painted instruments. Next to them were two standard-bearers, their large red flags with a blue circle motif and black fringes blowing in the breeze. The standard-bearers and four pairs of soldiers holding regimental pennants were all clad from head to toe in chain mail, and behind them stood officers and more standard-bearers in blue and red gowns. A group of professional musicians and dancers were performing a ceremonial dance in the middle of the road, and following the general were rank upon rank of cavalry. Fengda stared for a long time at the picture, fascinated by its figures and pageantry.

It was already mid-afternoon when they set off again for Moon Lake and Rumbling Dune, heading back toward the town for eight miles before taking the road directly west for another mile. Worn out by the excitement of seeing the caves, Fengda slept. When he awoke, he found they had already reached the great sand dunes that surrounded the crescent moon–shaped lake. The lake was perfectly blue, and the air was filled with the scent of the flowers of sand jujube. Crowds of sightseers milled around the water's edge and on the terraces of a small temple on its southern shore. There were more stalls, and Fengda soon noticed a peddler selling children's toys that hung in a jumble of shapes and colors from the wooden-framed pack on his back: ribbons, tops, hats, rattles, dolls, puppets, wheeled animals, cricket cages, and many more. Fengda chose a small, narrow-waisted double drum.

The whole family then joined a crowd climbing one of the largest dunes. It was hard work clambering up the slope, and

his mother kept slipping, but everyone was laughing and joking. When they reached the top, they sat in rows with their feet stuck out in front of them and then, at a shout from one of the party, set themselves sliding downward, taking the sand with them in a great shower. After a few seconds, a deep rumbling came from the very center of the dune and echoed around the lake. Fengda felt the dune resonating beneath him like an enormous drum.[11] He held onto his mother as their bodies cascaded downward in a flurry of arms and legs. In a few seconds, they were at the bottom.

Fengda enjoyed school but he did not possess enough aptitude to sit for the state examinations, though his father continued to dream. Fengda's fellow pupils ranged from the children of the town's elite to postulants awaiting ordination. One pupil was an orphan who, since he had no relatives to care for him, the local authorities had decreed should be admitted to the monastery. Most of the time, the orphan was expected to run errands for the monks or carry out menial tasks—he was nicknamed "crow-chaser" because one of his jobs was to scare birds away from the crops—but in his spare time he was allowed to attend classes, and eventually he hoped to be ordained as a monk.[12]

Fengda himself was interested in Buddhism and regularly read sutras, but he also found the astronomical texts on the movement of the seasons and the heavenly bodies fascinating. In the evening, he would lie on his back in the courtyard of his house and stare at the night sky. The monastery library had several treatises on astronomy and divination, and, once Fengda had mastered the Confucian classics, he was allowed to study them.[13] Among them was a star chart showing the constellations identified long ago by three great Chinese astronomers, and Fengda could soon name most of what he could see in the sky.[14] He then started to learn the lore of the stars and the planets, the twenty-eight

lodgings of the moon, and the implications of an eclipse, a comet, or a nova. He was taught, for example, how the death of the rebel Rokshan had been foretold two centuries before by the passage of a planet through a group of stars called “the Mane” (the Pleiades), which were associated with nomadic foreigners, wars, and executions. One of the monks also showed him copies of various almanacs held in the monastery library, including several printed editions, one of which came from the Chinese capital.15 But most interesting to Fengda was an almanac printed in tiny characters on a piece of paper barely three and a half feet long. It was for the year 877, six years before Fengda’s birth, and contained a mass of detail.16 Fengda pored over it for hours at a time, determined to master its secrets.

Calendrical knowledge was, like everything else on the Silk Road, an amalgam of influences from many countries. In Dunhuang, they used the Chinese calendar, but by this time elements of Indian and Babylonian astronomy and astrology had been assimilated by Chinese calendar makers and incorporated with their own considerable expertise. They added the theory of numbers, colors, and elements, yin-yang, and constellations. Chinese astronomers used a solar calendar for their calculations and then converted it into a mixed lunar and solar calendar. Because the lunar year is only 354 days, it was necessary to make periodic adjustments —by adding intercalary months—to conform to the solar cycle of just over 365 days. The start of the year would therefore vary, and it was not possible to assign a fixed date for sowing or harvesting crops or other farming tasks. The calendar’s primary role, however, was as a regulator of official, rather than agricultural, life.

The concept of “Heaven’s Mandate,” propounded by a classical Chinese philosopher, gave people the right to rebel if the current ruler possessed insufficient virtue. The emperor, man, earth, the sky, stars, sun, and moon were all

part of one seamless natural order composed of yin and yang. If the emperor did not rule in accordance with the morality attendant upon his role in the natural order, then the whole universe was thrown into disharmony. This might manifest itself as an eclipse or a comet. Thus, the emperor wanted to ensure that his own astronomers would predict any unusual movement in the heavenly bodies and present a harmless interpretation. Otherwise, rebels might seize on the event and declare it to be a sign of the emperor's inability to rule, thus giving their rebellion legitimacy. At the start of every Chinese dynasty, the imperial astronomers were instructed to calculate a new calendar to show the emperor's understanding of and harmony with the natural order. Each dynasty was also associated with a certain number, color, and element. If portents appeared, then it could be taken as a sign that the astronomers had made a mistake and that their calculations did not accord with the situation prevailing in the cosmic sphere.

For these reasons, the activities of astronomers and the production of calendars were carefully monitored at the highest levels. Only imperially appointed astronomers were allowed to produce calendars, which were then distributed to the provinces. Nevertheless, unofficial calendars, called almanacs, continued to be produced, as a memorial of 835 noted: "In the provinces of Sichuan and Huainan, printed almanacs are on sale in the markets. Every year, before the Imperial Observatory has submitted the new calendar for approval and had it officially promulgated, these printed almanacs flood the empire. This violates the principle that the calendar is a gift of His Imperial Majesty."[17]

Printing, using carved wooden blocks, had been invented in China by at least the eighth century, and it was used by Buddhists to propagate their teachings. Some of the earliest printed texts were short prayers accompanying pictures of popular deities such as the Heavenly Kings or the

bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, and they were sold in monastery stalls. However, almanac publishers also realized the potential of this new technology, and soon privately printed almanacs were on sale, particularly in the south of China where the central government's powers of supervision were less easily enforced. The Tang dynasty's attempt to monopolize production of the official calendar stemmed from economic as much as political motives: the calendar was essential for all officials and popular among the rest of the population, and the production of pirate copies denied the state considerable income from sales. After 835, it was stipulated, in what is almost certainly the oldest publication ordinance in the world, that the private printing of calendars by local administrations and their private possession were forbidden.18 But the law was flouted, as clearly shown by the almanac from the Chinese capital held in the monastery library at Dunhuang. It was produced by a family firm of printers in the Eastern Market of Chang'an, right under the noses of the emperor and his high officials whose palaces and villas abutted on the market. In Dunhuang, the private production of almanacs was probably not considered seditious.

Despite the imperial prohibition, which was reiterated at intervals, almanacs were produced everywhere and sold cheaply throughout China. In addition to giving the days and their names, according to the Chinese system of the heavenly stems and earthly branches and the five elements (water, earth, metal, wood, and fire), the almanacs indicated on which days it was safe to carry out certain activities. These ranged from cutting hair to marriage, funerals, and embarking on a journey. The system had a long pedigree in China, "day books" being produced independently long before the information was incorporated into almanacs.

The central register of the almanac for 877 that Fengda studied so intently was devoted to the animals of the twelve-

year cycle, a system brought from India. The almanac included tiny illustrations of the animals and nuptial advice for those born in each year. The lower register contained a charm and geomantic information. Charms were used to ward off evil. The almanac itself might be hung from a bed or doorpost for this purpose, or the charm might be copied onto a separate piece of paper that was pasted on a wall. The charm in the 877 almanac was intended to “bring order to the household.” The geomantic, or “fengshui,” diagrams offered guidance on the placing of houses and tombs. “Fengshui” literally means “wind and water,” the traditional Chinese term for landscape. Just as the emperor’s actions affected the harmonious balance of yin and yang, so the wrong placement of a house or tomb might bring misfortune to the resident. Most people in Dunhuang, from the top officials to the poorest slave, held a wide range of superstitious beliefs that they believed gave them some control over their daily lives. Most people who bought the almanacs did not trust their own ability to interpret the mass of cryptic information—indeed, many of them could not even read—and so, if they wanted something explained, they would pay a specialist diviner. In the meantime, the almanac itself acted as a talisman.

It would be many years before Fengda mastered all the theories needed to produce his own almanac, but he had other interests. He had moved from the Buddhist school, which only taught young children, to the local government-run prefectural school. At the age of twenty, when he was still copying texts at that school, he started, in the style of a Chinese gentleman, to compose poetry. His handwriting was now much improved, and the texts he was studying were far more advanced; the one he was working on was a divination text. After he had signed and dated the copy, 8 June 902, he wrote his poems in the space left at the end of the scroll.19 Laden with phrases from the classics, they expressed the

ambitions of a Confucian gentleman, one couplet reading: “The youth who fails to study poems and rhapsodies, is like the withered roots of a flowering tree.”[20]

Some of Fengda’s fellow pupils had moved when young men from the prefectural school to a specialist college attached to the government-run Rites Academy. Here they trained in ceremonial etiquette. Several manuals existed in Dunhuang on the conduct of ceremonies and social occasions associated with government office, giving guidance, for example, on how to bow properly before a polo match or on choosing appropriate music for official banquets. Others were devoted to letter writing, providing models of letters for all situations.[21] The letters generally started with greetings and stock phrases about the weather, such as “twenty-fourth of first month, still cold,” or “sixth month, unseasonably hot.” Some were for specific purposes— “A manual on letter writing between friends,” “Sample letters of condolence,” and “Congratulatory forms,” for example—but others contained a broader selection of letters arranged in chapters: “Communications of a complementary nature between fellow-officials”; “Letters of kind enquiry etc. to members of the general public”; “Layman’s letters to Buddhist and Daoist monks with their replies”; and “Letters between kinsfolk.” They included letters for every conceivable situation, including a morning-after letter to apologize to the host for getting drunk at a dinner party:

> Yesterday, having drunk too much, I was so intoxicated as to pass all bounds; but none of the rude and coarse language I used was uttered in a conscious state. The next morning, after hearing others speak on the subject, I realized what had happened, whereupon I was overwhelmed with confusion and ready to sink into the earth with shame. It was due to a vessel of my small capacity being filled for the nonce too full. I humbly trust that you in your wise benevolence will not condemn me for my transgression. Soon I will come to apologize in person, but meanwhile I beg to send this written communication for your kind inspection. Leaving much unsaid, I am yours respectfully.[22]

The students at the academy were destined for government appointment and were expected to be able to write the appropriate letter at the appropriate time on behalf of other officials. Documents such as the letter-writing manuals were kept in an official repository, separate from the monastery library and with its own Keeper of the Official Archives.

In 907, five years after Fengda's initial attempts at poetry, rumors reached Dunhuang of the fall of the Tang dynasty. Fengda's father's hopes that his sons might become central government officials were dashed. Although a new dynasty declared itself in the heartland of China, much of the rest of the country split into independent kingdoms, and in Dunhuang the local authorities continued to use the Tang calendar and the deposed emperor's reign title for another three years until the ruling Zhang family was usurped in a bloodless coup by the Cao family, led by Cao Yijin.23 By this time, Fengda had left school and married. Like his father, he now worked as a clerk in local government, but he continued to study and copy texts and had started to produce more substantial works of his own, including a collection of miracle tales on the merits accrued from upholding, chanting, or simply owning *The Diamond Sutra.*

The diamond is a Buddhist symbol of indestructibility and power over illusion. *The Diamond Sutra* had first been translated from the Sanskrit in about AD 402 by the famous Kuchean monk-translator, Kumārajīva, and by the tenth century it had become very popular among Chinese Buddhists (see figure 26).24 All sutras are traditionally held to be sermons delivered by the Buddha during his lifetime and transcribed after the Third Buddhist Council of the Mauryan king Aśoka. They begin with the phrase, "Thus I have heard," and then describe the place where the sermon was first given. *The Diamond Sutra,* the text records, was originally preached in a park in northern India. The text also

reports that a large crowd was present, including over a thousand monks. The sutra itself consists of a dialogue between the Buddha and his elderly disciple, Subhūti, and is a distillation in one scroll of another extremely long sutra, *The Perfection of Wisdom Sutra,* which fills dozens of scrolls. Both are central Mahāyāna texts and, like many other sutras of this school, emphasize the merits of copying, reading, reciting, and expounding sutras, thereby ensuring their transmission to later generations.

Fengda's composition expanded on the text of the sutra itself. There, Buddha asks Subhūti questions in order to elucidate a central doctrine of Buddhism: that the material world is an illusion, and therefore neither individual people nor objects exist. This is called the principle of non-duality. One of the questions concerns the number of grains of sand in the Ganges river. "Suppose," says Buddha, "there were as many River Ganges as there are sand grains. Surely the total number of sand grains in all these rivers would be immense?"25 But this is a trick question. Sand grains are part of the material world, and, as Buddha has explained before, the material world is an illusion. There are no individual grains of sand, just as there is no Ganges river and no Subhūti.

FIGURE 26. Detail from the frontispiece of *The Diamond Sutra* showing the monk Subhūti flanked by lions. (The British Library, Or.8210/P.2.)

Buddha also explains the importance of the sutra itself in the process of salvation. He again questions Subhūti: “If a good man or woman filled more than three thousand million worlds with the seven treasures of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, rubies, and carnelian, or the seven royal treasuries with pearls, elephants, and dark, swift horses, would he or she gain great merit?”26 Subhūti agrees that the merit would be considerable, but the Buddha explains that, if the same person were to understand only four sentences of *The Diamond Sutra* and explain them to others, the merit would be far greater.

After Fengda’s own composition on this theme, he copied a text ascribed to an earlier Chinese emperor consisting of a series of hymns extolling the merits of *The Diamond Sutra*. Fengda’s dedication expressed his hope that “for ever after, for believers as well as departed and deceased spirits, including my parents and all the people of the region,

blessings will be like the grass in spring, and sins like sprouts in autumn."[27] He signed himself as a lay Buddhist believer.

Although Fengda's education was not sufficient for him to be able to sit for the state examination, it did help him get a job in the local regime. He became a military aide. His tasks were administrative rather than military, but, since General Zhang's defeat of the Tibetans, the Dunhuang area was called "Returning to Allegiance Army District" by the Chinese emperor and treated as a military garrison, with military titles for many of its staff . This was an echo of China's former glory on the Silk Road when it had garrisons across the Tarim as far as the Pamirs and even clashed with the Arab caliphate. Those days were long gone.

After many years of study, Fengda accrued sufficient knowledge to try his hand at calculating a calendar (see figure 27). It was 924, and he prepared the manuscript himself, complete with drawings of the Plough constellation.[28] In subsequent years, he employed scribes to copy his calendars, but they had to reuse old paper. Fine paper made in central China was rare and expensive, and even local paper was sometimes hard to find. As a result, paper was rarely thrown away, particularly not if it was inscribed with scriptural texts because these made the piece of paper a sacred object, worthy of reverence in itself. When a monk discovered that inscribed paper was being used in the privies of the Chinese imperial palace, he was mortified and wrote a poem to vent his feelings:

> Confucian scholars study the Five Classics, Buddhist scholars the Three Baskets,
>
> Confucians are considered to observe the proper ritual and to be filial and loyal, and so they are chosen as officials.
>
> Yet in their examinations they use the same characters as those used to write the Buddhist sutras.
>
> Some of them do not think of this and they disparage the sacred texts

of Buddhism, using them as privy paper.

Their sins are as numerous as the grains of sand in the River Ganges, and many lives of repentance will not be sufficient to erase them.

Their bodies will sink for five hundred ages; they will always be condemned to be insects living in the night soil pit.[29]

We do not know whether Fengda used paper for such purposes, but in 928, while looking for a suitable sheet for one of his compositions, he came across his youthful poem and appended a short note: “This was written in my youth, when I could hardly manage the way. . . . I was but twenty years when I composed it. This year, happening upon the poem again, I am overcome with shame.”[30]

FIGURE 27. Detail from Zhai Fengda’s calendar for 924. (The British Library, Or.8210/S.2404.)

Fengda’s calendar making did not pass unnoticed. He was

promoted, first becoming chancellor of the Directorate of Education in Dunhuang and then an erudite of his old school. In China, the post of erudite was reserved mainly for professors in the prestigious state academies, or for those attached to court bureaus with specialist medical or astronomical knowledge, and the post was ranked in the top nine grades of government service, the first division.31 (Although China had tens of thousands of clerks and bureaucrats to run its huge empire, only the elite reached the nine grades.) With his new position, Fengda received the honorary Chinese title "Grand Master of Imperial Entertainments with Silver Seal and Blue Ribbon," but Dunhuang was no longer really Chinese.32 Such titles continued to be bestowed on the city's officials, but they were vestiges of a previous age, and Fengda's title would have meant little in central China.

Fengda's wife died in 958. He was now seventy-five but in good health and still working. He had a pupil to whom he was teaching his calendrical skills, and he had recently been promoted to the position of vice director of the Ministry of Public Affairs, responsible for local building projects, the maintenance of roads and irrigation channels, and the standardization of weights and measures.33 Some years before, he had completed a work on the geography and legends of the Dunhuang area, and he used this, along with geographical treatises written by others, as guides in his new post.34

Although he had not chosen a celibate life, Fengda retained his Buddhist faith, especially after the death of his brothers and grandson. He and his wife had given frequent donations to the Buddhist monastery. One year, after a particularly good harvest, they offered grain for the poor of the town. The monasteries performed some charitable functions—in some places monastic pharmacies handed out free medicine to the poor—but such activities were not

coordinated or widespread.35 The poor relied on local government aid and private charity. When neither were forthcoming, and all their own assets had been sold or pawned, many were forced into a life of crime, becoming members of bandit gangs that preyed on the countryside.

Fengda was never in danger of being reduced to such a state. He had income from land, a salary and all the extra perks of an official, and the proceeds from his calendar making. As he grew wealthier, he was able to make more donations, even commissioning a painting in a newly excavated cave. Since the military governor and all the local dignitaries also made contributions to the cave, it is likely that Fengda's donation brought him to the attention of influential men and gave him status in the community. The main statue group in this cave was paid for by a local guild of merchants, similarly concerned to gain both worldly and other-worldly merit.

On the death of his wife, Fengda commissioned copies of ten sutras, intended for her benefit rather than his own.36 According to Fengda's belief in purgatory—an amalgam of Indian, Buddhist, and Chinese ideas—his wife might spend almost three years in the underworld before being reborn in another bodily form. That form would depend on her behavior during her past lives, her karma. But before their fate was decided, the dead had to appear successively before ten judges—the ten kings of the underworld. The first seven audiences took place on every seventh day after death. Fengda's wife died on 23 March 958. On 29 March, Fengda dedicated the first sutra to his wife to coincide with her appearance before King Guang. He also commissioned a painting of Buddha and organized a memorial feast. Over the next seven weeks, he dedicated another six sutras, each on the appropriate day, and held six more memorial feasts. His wife's fifth audience was with King Yama, and for this event

he dedicated *The Sutra on the Prophecy Received by King Yama,* also known as *The Sutra of the Ten Kings.* This described the ten audiences and the fate of those who had sinned.[37]

After the seven weekly audiences, Fengda's deceased wife would have to wait until the hundredth day following her death for the next audience. Fengda's devotions did not flag, and for this day he commissioned the sutra concerning Mulian's journey to the underworld to save his mother.[38] This story ends with Buddha instructing the bereaved to make donations to Buddhist monks and nuns on the fifteenth day of the seventh lunar month, and promising that the benefits from these acts of piety will accrue to their ancestors and the recently dead. This was the legitimization for the Ghost Festival.[39]

Thereafter, only two more audiences had to be endured: the penultimate one, which took place a year after death; and, in the third year after death, the final audience before "The King Who Turns the Wheel of Rebirth in the Five Paths." The tenth sutra, copied on Fengda's order to coincide with his wife's last appearance, was a discussion on karmic retribution. At the end of it, Fengda listed the whole series of memorial feasts and sutra copyings on behalf of his wife, in case the king had forgotten them, ending with a note:

> The merit from copying the sutras listed above is dedicated as a posthumous blessing to my departed wife. I respectfully invite gods, dragons and other members of the eight classes of beings, the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, the bodhisattva Dizang, the four great Heavenly Kings, and the eight Guardian Spirits to verify it. May she receive all the blessings of the field, be reborn in a happy place, and encounter good people. Offered with a concentrated mind.[40]

Whether or not Fengda's efforts helped his wife, his own mundane fortunes continued to rise. He was awarded yet

more titles, including the “Honor of the Crimson Fish Pouch,” and was also named as an “Erudite of the Classics in Dunhuang Prefecture.” He continued to make calendars and to train his pupil.41 Fengda lived to hear of the reunification of the Chinese empire by the Song dynasty in 960, but he never made the journey to the land of his ancestors. He died a few years later, in about 966.

NINE

The Nun's Tale

MIAOFU, 880–961

This fleeting world is like
A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream,
A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

Prayer at end of *The Diamond Sutra*[1]

Miaofu's room was dark and thick with smoke.[2] Offerings of flowers, fruit, and incense had been placed in front of an image of the Amitābha Buddha that hung on the wall above a small shrine. In accordance with death-bed ritual, the abbot asked Miaofu in which Buddha-land she wished to be reborn, and he then described the joys she would encounter there, intoning the Buddhas of the ten directions and comforting her by explaining how each in turn would welcome her after her death. Then he led the clergy in chanting *The Sutra of Impermanence*.[3]

Miaofu was the former abbess of a large nunnery in Dunhuang. It was 961, and word had recently reached the city that, after half a century of division, China had been reunited under the Song dynasty. Miaofu's father, an official in the military governorship of Dunhuang, had been Chinese,

while her mother was Tibetan. The Tibetan empire had ruled Dunhuang for over sixty years and, even after its soldiers were driven out by a local force in 848, many Tibetans remained in the town.[4] Their empire, too, had been subject to years of division and civil war, but, unlike China, there was no sign of a new emperor to reunite the country.

Miaofu had always been eager to learn about the world outside Dunhuang, her curiosity aroused as a child by the stories her father and grandmother told. Her father spoke with great nostalgia of his youth in China during the Tang dynasty. Her maternal grandmother spoke with equal feeling of the heyday of Tibet and the great Buddhist temples that surpassed anything found in Dunhuang. As Miaofu lay dying, surrounded by the sound of the monks and nuns chanting, she drifted in and out of consciousness, reliving memories of her youth.

She was a girl again, preparing for her ordination, which was to take place in a roped-off area within the main monastery building.[5] The ceremony to purify the building and its precincts was over, and only those who were to be ordained and the officiating clergy remained inside the incense-filled hall. Banners of colored silk with depictions of the Buddha and bodhisattvas hung from the wooden columns and rafters. Miaofu was one of several local girls receiving the initial ordination. When her turn came, she stepped forward and prostrated herself in front of the great statue of the Buddha and saluted the abbess. One of the nuns took a knife and cut off her long hair near the roots, placing it in a small tray held by another nun. Again Miaofu prostrated herself three times. Her head was washed and shaved smooth while she closed her eyes and recited the name of the Buddha. She then had to recite the ten vows, prostrate herself once more in front of the Buddha, and thank the ordaining nuns and monks. She was presented with monastic robes and a begging bowl. The day after the ceremony, she

was given a certificate stamped with images of the Buddha and a government seal for which her father had paid a donkey and a cow.6 Miaofu was now a novice nun in the eyes of both the church and the state.

Miaofu's parents were devout lay Buddhists and had not objected to her entering monastic life. Her father sometimes said that it was fated that she should do so, since she had been born on the same day as the rebels had taken the Chinese capital, Chang'an, and killed his mother and sister. That was in the winter of 880. In the months that followed, refugees fleeing from the rebels brought stories of the violent destruction of Chang'an and reported that few women left there had escaped rape and death. Miaofu's father heard more from a courtesan called Larishka who passed through Dunhuang on her way back to Kucha in 881.7 She had a livid red scar across her forehead, and she told of how all her fellow courtesans had been raped then murdered by the rebels, and that she had been wounded while trying to protect the youngest girl. Miaofu's father had been awarded three years' leave to mourn his mother, the traditional period for a parent in China, but he was unable to return to Chang'an to arrange a proper burial in the family plot until 884, when the rebels were finally defeated. He went alone, for China was still unsettled, though under nominal control of the Tang dynasty. He found the capital in near anarchy and the emperor still absent.

He returned to Dunhuang several months later with his own stories of the sack of Chang'an, bringing back a poem composed by an examination candidate who had been in the capital in 880.8 In the poem, a young woman, caught by the rebels when they entered Chang'an, recounted what had followed. Miaofu was not allowed to read it, but on several evenings she was woken by the sound of her father crying. After this she found an opportunity to look at the poem

without her parents' knowledge. It was difficult for her to read, and when she had struggled through two stanzas she wished she had not. The words conjured up images that she would prefer to forget, images far worse than any of the scenes from hell depicted on the local temple walls:

> Every home now runs with bubbling fountains of blood,
> Every place rings with a victim's shrieks that cause the very earth to quake,
> Dancers and courtesans must undergo secret outrage;
> Infants and tender maidens are torn living from their parents' arms.[9]

It was at this time that Miaofu learned she had been born on the day her grandmother and aunt had died. Perhaps this was also when she decided to become a nun. There were certain advantages attached to entering a nunnery, for not all nuns did so as a vocation. A nun could study, even though many monks and more nuns remained illiterate, and she was able to avoid an arranged marriage. Several Chinese princesses had entered the Daoist order seemingly for this reason.[10] Other girls were persuaded by their parents, who saw it as a means to avoid paying a dowry and an opportunity to gain influence in the monastic community. A contemporary contract records the loan of eighteen pecks of beans by a monk to the father of a novice.[11] The loan carried no interest, which was unusual at this time because monks were the main usurers in the community and regularly charged interest above the legal rate of 6 percent.[12] The debtor was to repay the loan at the end of the eighth month, after the harvest, and if he defaulted his goods would be seized.

Miaofu was only eleven when she was ordained in 891, though the minimum age stipulated by Buddhist law for ordination was twelve. Her father therefore had to apply on her behalf to the military governor for permission for her to enter the nunnery early. The permit was prepared and the governor made his mark after his surname and added three

impressions of his large, square seal in red ink.13 Some parents were less willing to hand over their children. A collection of stories about famous nuns of the past recounted the argument used by a monk to persuade a reluctant father: “If you consent to her plan she will indeed raise her family to glory and bring you blessings and honour. She will guide you across the great ocean of suffering to nirvāṇa.”14 Another story told of the Abbess Miaoyin, outside of whose house hundreds of carriages bearing visitors with gifts would line up, and who was reputed to be richer than many members of the imperial family.15 The blessings offered by monastic life could be both spiritual and material, the stories implied.

After Miaofu’s ordination, a local monk complained to the military governor about violations of the Buddhist law, citing Miaofu and forty other nuns. “Their parents,” the monk wrote, “all gave permission for these girls to become nuns and the girls were all happy to receive the precepts. However, some of them are too young and some have not followed the Buddha’s teachings and have contravened secular statutes. They must be controlled and disciplined.”16 We do not know what their particular crimes were, but there was considerable prejudice against the institution of female clergy, especially among more doctrinaire monks. Women were held to be further down the chain of rebirth than men, and Buddhist texts made it clear that Buddha had only accepted women as part of the monastic order after considerable persuasion from his own mother. Some monks even refused to ordain women, and others would not allow women into the monasteries or let them attend their lectures. Nevertheless, five nunneries were in the Dunhuang area, the largest housing almost 200 nuns.17

The process of ordination was more demanding for women than for men.18 At twelve years old, both boys and girls took the first set of precepts: vows to abstain from drink, sex, murder, and other sins. But boys could undergo full

ordination at eighteen, taking between 215 and 263 precepts dictated by the monastic code. Girls at eighteen took only an intermediate stage of ordination and were then supposed to undergo another two years of study before being received fully into the order. This additional requirement had been instituted, so tradition said, after a nun ordained by Buddha at the age of eighteen had turned out to be in the early stages of pregnancy. At twenty, nuns were required to take between 290 and 380 precepts for full ordination. However, Miaofu had heard from Tibetan and Indian monks of the female deity Tārā, worshipped by many in their countries as an equal to the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (see figure 28). When it was suggested that she change sex in order to attain enlightenment more quickly, Tārā replied: “There are many who desire enlightenment in a man’s body, but none who work for the benefit of sentient beings in the body of a woman. Therefore, until the world of suffering is empty, I shall work for the benefit of sentient beings in a woman’s body.”19

FIGURE 28. Tārā, a Tantric Buddhist deity. (Drawing by John Huntington.)

Miaofu received her temple name, which means “Wonderful Blessings,” when she took her first set of vows. The ordination took place in the Lingxiu monastery in Dunhuang, which she had entered several months before to study the precepts. Some of her classmates had already spent many years in the monastery and were only now considered ready to take their vows. Others were, like her, from outside. Their classes were led by experienced monks and nuns in a large hall. Miaofu was taught all the practical aspects of life as a nun: how to sweep floors, how to eat, how to walk (this depended on whether she was wearing the wide-sleeved outer robe or the narrow-sleeved underrobe), how to salute a superior, how to speak, how to dress, how to make a bed, and how to make her clothes into a bundle for

traveling. She was also taught how to receive guests and how to hand these duties over to another nun the following day.[20] She was expected to learn extracts from the sutras and to recite them throughout the day. In addition, there were many times during her daily activities when she had to recite an appropriate prayer.

The boys and girls lived in segregated dormitories on either side of a central courtyard among the crowded buildings of the monastery complex. The privies stood in a corner that backed onto the vegetable garden, making transport of the night-soil to the garden an easy affair. In addition to this small plot inside the walls, the monastery owned much of the surrounding farmland, which was cultivated by serf laborers and tenant farmers. The produce was stored in granaries inside the monastery, to be lent out at advantageous rates of interest or used as currency for the purchase of various necessities, such as the hemp seed needed to produce oil for cooking and light.[21]

The income earned from such transactions was considerable, and it was supplemented by donations and by the sale of ordinations, sutras, and services. But the monastery gained most of its income from its mills and oil presses and was easily the richest institution in the community. For many of the local residents, the monastery was also important because it offered services, whereas the secular authorities always seemed to want to take something. Government was associated with military service, the collection of taxes, and law enforcement. Few paid their taxes willingly. Many of the local landowners pledged their land to a monastery, thus making it tax exempt, while they carried on working and profited from it as before. Others exploited the tax-exempt status of the clergy and purchased ordination certificates so that they were registered as monks and nuns, but they continued to live ordinary lives with their families in the towns and villages.[22] The law was an

uncertain ally. Although some found it useful in civil cases, such as broken contracts or the incorrect allocation of land, criminal justice was feared. Many of those arrested did not return from prison. Some were tortured to extract a confession—the mainstay of most prosecution cases—and died as a result, whereas others died of disease in the noisome prison cells while still awaiting trial. Once a case came to trial, the luckiest would receive a comparatively light sentence, a beating with a light or heavy stick, but, for more serious crimes, men were sent to undergo military service in a distant province, and women were assigned to government-owned brothels. For the most serious crimes, capital punishment was meted out, though the emperor usually announced a general amnesty at the beginning of each new year, so many of those condemned to death were reprieved.23 In contrast, the monastery had no prison, and when people were in trouble it could help with loans of seed-grain for the next harvest, a cooking pot for winter, or a small plot of land. It offered the poor employment, the rich redemption, and a tax haven to both.

Miaofu drifted back into consciousness. She was aware of the small group of monks and nuns on their prayer mats around her bed. She tried to concentrate, but the rhythmic drone of their chanting soon set her thinking once more of her past. She was sitting on the rush mat floor of the lecture hall with ten other nuns reciting *The Diamond Sutra.* The hall was dim, but the smell of a hot, dry summer's day filtered in, making her restless. It was 900. She had been a novice for almost ten years at one of the several nunneries in the city and was preparing for full ordination.

For several years after her initiation as a novice, Miaofu had been expected to runs errands and help the other nuns. She also had to attend sutra lectures and classes with the Master of the Law and the Master of the Teaching: monks who were her guides in the monastic rules and Buddhist

teachings. Because she was literate, Miaofu was given sutras to read, memorize, and chant during her work. She was instructed in meditation techniques and started to learn Sanskrit sounds so that she could chant sutras and prayers in their original language.

The Buddhist canon consisted of three parts, known by their Sanskrit name Tripiṭaka (literally “Three Baskets”): the sutras (the lectures of Buddha); monastic rules (the vinaya); and commentaries on sutras written by monks after the time of Buddha. Works that were considered apocryphal, such as *The Sutra of the Ten Kings,* were not incorporated into the canon. Certainly not written at the time of Buddha and almost certainly composed in Chinese, these sutras were nevertheless often popular among both clergy and lay believers.

The taking of the full vows was a much longer and more complex ceremony than the initial ordination. The ordinands were of all ages. A special platform was erected for the occasion in the neighboring monastery, and its construction took over a week. Cartloads of earth were brought into the courtyard in front of the lecture hall and emptied into an area marked out by a square wooden frame. When the frame was full and the earth piled in a high mound, laborers stamped it down with heavy wooden posts until it was completely flat and flush with the top of the frame. Several layers were created by the same method, and then a smaller platform was built in on top. Stairs were cut from the tamped earth, and the posts erected around the perimeter were festooned with banners and streamers made from colorful silk. Many ordination platforms in monasteries elsewhere were similarly temporary, but at Mount Wutai there was a permanent structure made of great blocks of stone, its sides faced with jade with lotus designs, on which was laid a green silk carpet. There, at the height of Chinese Buddhism, hundreds of monks and nuns were ordained each year.[24]

Miaofu's ordination coincided with the annual spring vegetarian banquet. Like a similar banquet held in the autumn, this was paid for by the military governor of Dunhuang, General Zhang, a descendant of the famous general who had driven out the Tibetans. After the ceremony was over, the twenty newly ordained monks and nuns were each given "the Three Sets of Clothing" by the military governor's office: an assembly robe (the *kāṣāya*); an overgarment (the *uttarāsaṅga*); and a shirt (the *antarvāsa*). They then entered the banquet hall and recited a prayer before the meal started. The ordination had finished early, for the banquet had to be arranged in the morning—no eating was allowed after midday. An exception was made only when monks had to carry out manual work in the afternoon; they were then allowed "night food." Over 1,500 local people attended the banquet—officials, soldiers, rich and influential lay believers, and members of the Dunhuang monastic community. The monastery kitchens had been busy for days preparing the vegetarian food.

After the banquet, many of the monks and nuns left the monastery to return to their family houses in the city and neighboring villages. Some of them were needed at home to look after aged parents or to help on the land. Miaofu had a sister-in-law who could carry out these tasks and so there was no need for her to return home. Moreover, she wanted to make her life in the monastery. She had read several texts concerning rules for the monastic community and was struck by the disparity between their injunctions and the actions of many of her fellow monks and nuns.25 She was eager to become an abbess of one of the local nunneries so that she could enforce the rules more strictly.

Miaofu woke again, startled by this recollection. For a moment she could remember that she had made a confession. When she had first realized the seriousness of her illness a few months before, she had arranged for seven

copies of *The Sutra of the Ten Kings* to be made as an act of repentance. At the end of each she wrote: “The disciple Miaofu, a troubled nun, with the thought of enlightenment in her mind, reverently had this scripture written on seven separate scrolls, and offers them with a concentrated mind.”26 In addition, in her will she left cloth to pay for offerings and the recitation of prayers at set intervals after her death. These prayers would be said on the days on which she would be brought before each of the ten kings of the underworld, when he would mete out the punishment for her evil deeds. The wall paintings in the cave temples outside Dunhuang showed the kings in the garb of Chinese magistrates sitting behind desks while the dead were brought before them. Those who protested when their sins were recounted were made to look into a mirror that reflected their past deeds. Others, their fates already decreed, were put in cangues, great wooden collars, and herded away by axe-wielding demons to the fiery city of Hell (see figures 29 and 30).

FIGURE 29. Demon supporting a heavenly king, after a ninth-century silk painting from Dunhuang. (The British Museum, 1919,0101,0.106. Ch.xlix.007. Drawing by author.)

The Sutra of the Ten Kings pronounced that "if any person . . . copies the text of this scripture, obeys its, and upholds it, then upon giving up his life he will instantly pass over the three evil paths [being reborn as an animal, a hungry ghost, or a being in hell], And in this body he will always avoid entering Avīci Hell."27 Offerings given on each of the appropriate days—the seventh day after the death, and every seventh day thereafter up to the forty-ninth day, and then on the hundredth day after death, a day during the first year, and another during the third year—also prevented the deceased from being reborn as a lesser being.

Miaofu's conscience troubled her because her early intentions of living according to the monastic rules had soon been overtaken by the realities of life in the nunnery to which she moved after her first ordination. The nunnery itself was far less well endowed than the large monastery where she had been trained for her ordination. There, monks in need "borrowed" food and goods from the monastic holdings, and Miaofu had soon realized that these "loans" were not always paid back. In addition, her Master of the Teaching had often used monastic goods to make loans to others, at a high rate of interest, repaying the capital to the monastery but keeping the interest for himself. Often his debtors had defaulted on their loans and had repaid him by allowing him free use of their land for a set number of years.28 She remembered how, when his will became public after his death, everyone was amazed at the extent of his wealth. The will had distinguished between those items considered to be monastic property and those originating from family property. The former were left to the monastery and the community. They included "seven pieces of silk and felt, two suits of fine silk, blankets, furlined cloaks, cloth and leather shoes, a belt made from fifteen ounces of silk and gold, silver dishes, copper dishes, oil containers made of wood with lids and handles, a she-ass of five years, and an ass of four years."29

His family property, which included items and land obtained as a result of his speculations on monastic holdings, was left to his various nephews, cousins, and fellow monks. To one of the novices he bequeathed “a piece of fine, white silk, a square saucepan with handles, the body of a lamp worth seven ounces of silver, a small ivory dish, other sundry items and a four-year-old ox.”30

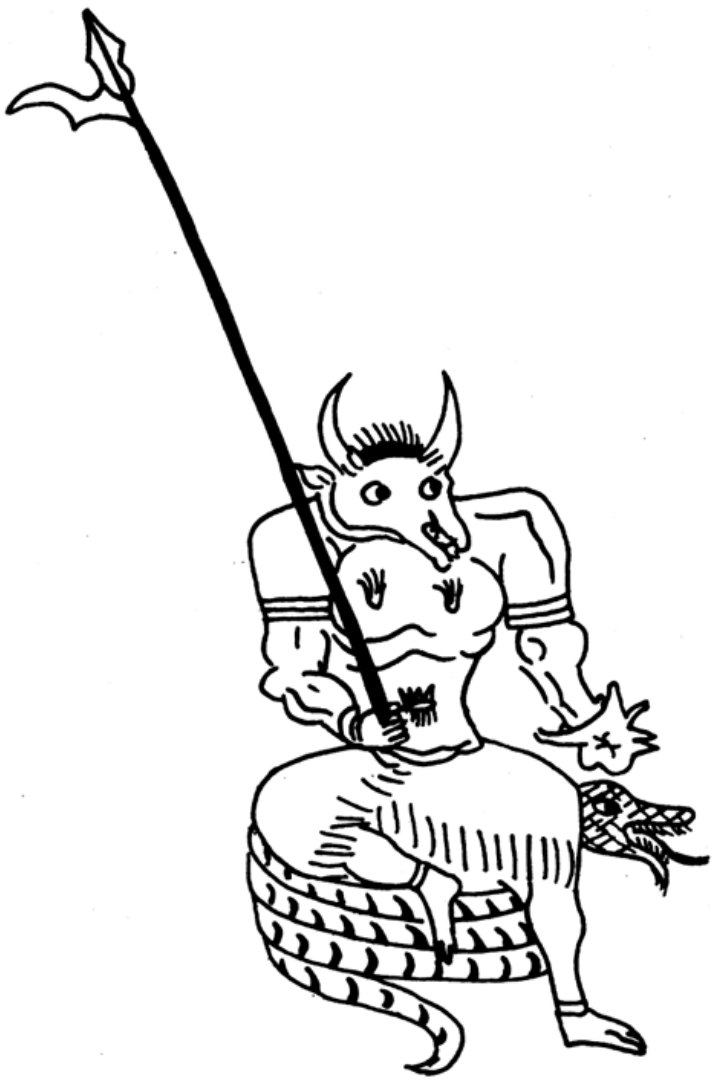

FIGURE 30. Demon guarding the gate to Hell, after the tenth-century illustrated manuscript of *The Sutra of the Ten Kings* from Dunhuang. (The British Library, Or.8210/

S.3961. Drawing by author.)

But commerce and usury were the province of men: there were few opportunities for nuns to accumulate wealth. Many were orphans or daughters of local peasants whose families had nothing to give them. All the nuns and monks begged in the town, but for some it was their only source of income. Miaofu's family was not poor, and they had provided her with a considerable sum on her ordination. Nevertheless, she was determined to augment her income. There were fees to be had for the recitation of sutras on behalf of the sick and the dying, and copying sutras was similarly rewarded, though professional scribes were usually men and rarely clergy. Thus, over the years Miaofu gradually increased her wealth by investing in some land, which provided a small annuity in grain, and by gaining patrons from among the local elite who, valuing her education, often presented her with gifts. Her father had taught her to read the Chinese classical texts as a child, and as a novice she had started to learn Sanskrit. Her grandmother had also taught her Tibetan. She enjoyed chatting with the wives of local dignitaries and learning the latest news from China and Tibet as well as local gossip of the town.

In 910, ten years after Miaofu's full ordination, the Zhang family that had ruled Dunhuang since 848 was supplanted by the Cao family.31 Cao Yijin, the first ruler, continued to offer allegiance to China and to call Dunhuang the "Returning to Allegiance Army District." The Chinese Tang dynasty had just fallen after many years of weak and ineffectual government, and, during most of the Cao family's reign, China was split into several regions, none powerful enough to reunite the country let alone to reestablish control in Dunhuang, over a thousand miles away, or their once-thriving links with lands beyond the Tarim. Nevertheless, the city's rulers continued to send envoys to the successive dynasties that claimed

central China, and in turn they continued to be awarded the title of Military Governor.

It was now 960, and the Cao family still ruled Dunhuang. Cao Yuanzhong, the current king and a keen patron of Buddhism, had been awarded the title of Military Governor by a succession of Chinese dynasties, and had even visited China in 955. At Miaofu's bedside, the monks and nuns, sustained by strong green tea to keep them awake during their long vigil, continued to chant. Miaofu was a senior member of the monastic community, respected as much for her actions as for her age. Not everyone had agreed with her appointment as abbess of the largest nunnery in Dunhuang when she was barely forty. But Miaofu had ruled strictly and well, and, most important, she had directed the nunnery's affairs very shrewdly. During her tenure, the nunnery gained possession of more land, two mill wheels, and an oil press.32

Monks and nuns were not supposed to deal in "impure" things, which included gold, silver, slaves, agriculture, animal husbandry, blankets, and saucepans as well as mill wheels and oil presses. Instead, each monastic institution had families bound to it in perpetuity—effectively serf households—who carried out the work on their behalf. Such families worked the mill wheels and oil press that belonged to Miaofu's nunnery, though they were not permitted to carry out work on their own initiative but had to apply for permission to the nunnery. A fixed percentage of the produce—flour and oil—was paid in kind to the nunnery as rent, and the nunnery in turn paid professional millwrights in kind to maintain and repair their property. After major repair work was completed, Miaofu had always ordered that a banquet be arranged for the nuns and artisans. The nunnery also provided the miller with the material necessary for his work—gauze to make sieves and an ox to carry flour to the nunnery's storehouse. A nun was appointed as steward to keep a careful written inventory of all goods entering and

leaving the storehouse.

The mill wheels were driven by water, and since this reduced the water available for irrigation, the local government forbade their use during the growing season. The sluice gates to the diversion canals were padlocked, and a local official was in charge of the key. If, during spring or summer, there was more than enough water for irrigation, then an exception was made and the gates opened; this was an occasion for another banquet, held at night at the millrace by lamplight. The local government also levied a tax on the mills and presses in spring and autumn.

The mills provided millet and wheat-flour for the nuns. The coarser flour left in the sieve was used to feed the serf households, and the bran was fed to the horses. Hemp-seed for the oil press had to be purchased, but the resulting oil was used both for cooking and to supply the lamps that burned perpetually in the Buddha Hall. Some of the nunnery's land was specifically allocated to defray this expense. Oilseed cakes were also used to fatten livestock.

The sounds of the nunnery filtered through into Miaofu's room. It seemed unusually noisy. But then she remembered: it was the end of the summer retreat, and everyone was preparing for the Ghost Festival.[33] The summer retreat was a practice inherited from India, where the monsoon rains curtailed the monks' activities.[34] There was no monsoon in the desert, but the clergy still went into retreat from the fourth lunar month to the seventh, the height of summer. They were supposed to spend their time in confession and meditation, but tempers often became frayed as clergy usually resident in the city moved into the monastic buildings, where their permanent residents were forced to share rooms and facilities. This summer, one of the nuns had complained about another who, she said, made too much noise when walking past her room to get water from the well. Miaofu was asked to speak to the offender, the daughter of

one of Miaofu's friends, a wealthy local landowner. The nunnery did not want to lose the patronage of her mother, especially so near to the Ghost Festival, a time when the laity traditionally made generous offerings to the church.

Miaofu's thoughts turned to the central story of the Ghost Festival, that of a disciple of Buddha who rescued his mother from hell. The disciple was named Mahāmaudgalyāyana but in Chinese was known as Mulian. Miaofu imagined the storyteller in the marketplace unfurling the scroll depicting Mulian's mother falling into the deepest hell of all, Avīci Hell, and the audience gasping in horror. He would then go on to explain why Mulian's mother deserved her fate.35

When Mulian goes abroad on a trading mission, he leaves his mother money to feed beggars and to pay for vegetarian feasts for the Buddhist clergy. His mother hides the money, and when Mulian returns she lies, saying that she has used it as he directed. After his parents' deaths, Mulian becomes a monk and, when he realizes that his mother is not in paradise, he goes in search of her. The king of the underworld, Yama, summons his karmawatcher, fate-investigator, and book-keeper. Mulian sets off and crosses the Wathellwedo river, where those about to enter hell stand wailing on the river's banks, about to be herded across by ox-headed demons. One tells Mulian:

> Please inform those sons and grandsons of ours who are still at home
> That it is pointless to make coffins and caskets of white jade.
> Gold is spent in vain when it is buried in the grave.
> Endless sorrow and signs of mourning are ultimately of no avail . . .
> If they wish to obliterate the suffering of the dead
> They can do no better than cultivate blessedness to save our souls from darkness.36

Mulian enters the realm of the General of the Five Ways, whose voice "rumbles like thunder and whose flashing eyes are like lightning." There he sees men and women whose

bellies are being ripped open and others whose faces are being skinned. “Even Mulian,” the storyteller relates as he unfurls the scroll showing these horrors in gory detail, “is frightened out of his wits.” The general tells him that his mother had been sent to Avīci Hell because of the weight of her sins. Mulian goes from one hell to another, his story related in further scrolls that depicted these intermediate hells:

> Irons disks from the air constantly plunge into their bodies,
> Fierce fires burn continuously beneath their feet,
> All parts of their skin have been stripped into shreds,
> Every inch of their bones and flesh has been charred.
> Bronze-colored crows peck incessantly at their hearts,
> While molten iron pours constantly over their heads.[37]

The storyteller would continue in a similar vein for some time, enjoying the effect on his audience. Mulian’s mother is in an even worse place, the storyteller informs them, “a place where, though your heart be made of iron or stone, you too will lose your wits and tremble with fear.” This is Avīci Hell. Mulian finds his mother there, nailed to a steel bed with forty-nine long spikes through her body. When she is released to see her son, “she clanks and clatters like the sound of five hundred broken-down chariots” because of the metal thorns in her body. She explains how, though her body is broken a thousand times, yet, at a cry from her jailers, it renews itself to be tortured once more.

Mulian has to leave his mother, for she is not allowed out of hell even though she says she has repented. He therefore goes to plead with Buddha, who agrees to go in person to save her. Because the Buddha is impartial, he rescues all those in hell at the same time. Mulian’s mother still has karmic debt to repay and so she is reborn as a hungry ghost, fated never to be able to satisfy her hunger and thirst. When

her son brings her rice and water, they turn to fire. Buddha then tells Mulian to organize a large purgatorial feast on the fifteenth day of the seventh month, the end of the summer retreat and the only day on which hungry ghosts can eat their fill. After attending this feast, Mulian's mother disappears. Buddha explains that she has been reborn as a black dog—a step up from a hungry ghost. Mulian finds her, and together they pray for seven days and seven nights, after which she is again transformed into a woman but this time allowed into Heaven, her karmic debt now repaid in full.

Miaofu shuddered in her sleep at this vision of hell, and her hand was squeezed by one of the attending nuns. She did not believe her sins to be as bad as those of Mulian's mother, but she hoped she had done enough to be reborn in heaven, or at least to be reincarnated as a human. She felt for her rosary beads and started to recite the *Avalokiteśvarasūtra.* This had always been one of her favorite sutras, and she had carried around a small illustrated booklet of the text.38 Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara was the manifestation of compassion.

When she was first bedridden, Miaofu had asked a scribe to come and transcribe her will. Several monks and nuns were called as witnesses, and the completed will was handed over to the abbot. Miaofu had her own substantial house and grounds in the nunnery, with quarters for her servant girl. Her will was primarily concerned with the disposal of this girl and of some of her moveable goods. She bequeathed the girl to her niece. As for the goods, it was not uncommon for such property to be auctioned after their owner died if an heir had not been specified. The monastic rules laid down certain regulations about the conduct of these auctions. A bid could be raised so long as the previous bid had not been called out three times, but after that it was unlawful to raise it again. "Unseemly language" was also prohibited. However,

this did not stop auctions from becoming boisterous affairs. Miaofu had witnessed several where wealthy monks from neighboring monasteries had vied with one another for the finest silks.

Miaofu also owned silk robes, though it was against monastic law to do so since the production of silk resulted in the death of the silkworms that had spun it. Some of the monks had their assembly robes, or *kāṣāya,* made for them out of the most expensive silk from central China. The *kāṣāya* was little more than a large patchwork rectangle, draped over one shoulder and across the chest like a shawl. The patches were meant to be old or discarded remnants of cotton or hemp and thus to symbolize the monks' state of poverty. The deep lustrous colors of the silk *kāṣāya* made a mockery of the robe's significance and the monks' vows. Miaofu left her silk robes to the local community of monks and nuns, along with several thousand feet of cotton cloth. They would be added to the goods received from other monks and nuns, rich individuals and those who had paid for religious services, and distributed at a general meeting of the community.

One such meeting, held in Dunhuang in 936, had listed silk brocades, quilted materials, gauze, felt, cotton, and other cloth as well as furniture and household items as the property of the local Buddhist community.39 Over 70,000 feet of cotton cloth had been donated to the monasteries in the previous three years, and after subtracting various expenses—which included a gift of fine silk to the Queen of Khotan and a saddle to local officials, as well as smaller gifts to the organizers of the ceremony—each monk and nun received 60 feet and each novice 30 feet for their personal use. There was a surplus of over 4,000 feet, presumably retained by the monastery for future disbursements. Although Chinese copper coins (called "cash") and silver ingots had long been in use, and a system of paper money

was just starting to be established among merchants, cloth and grain were the usual currency in tenth-century Dunhuang.40 The Chinese state dealt only in a minimum of 1,000 cash strung together through a square central hole in each coin. A thousand cash, equivalent to about an ounce of silver, weighed more than one and a half pounds. In loan transactions among the local people at Dunhuang, however, the capital and any accrued interest were usually paid in kind —in grain or cloth—as were state taxes.

The day of the Ghost Festival dawned. This was one of the busiest times of the year for the nunnery, especially important since the Ghost Festival was the main festival of giving, so the nuns rose early. Bowls were placed all round the nunnery for the offerings that people would make to prevent their ancestors suffering the same fate as Mulian's mother. After the morning banquet, the streets of the city filled with people who had come to watch the Buddhist procession that always took place on religious festivals.41 The monks and nuns set up stalls in the marketplace and on the roads leading to the monasteries and nunneries, selling sutras, divination, and medicine. The streets were full of music and laughter and entertainers. The storyteller, as Miaofu had imagined, unfurled his scrolls and began his tale of Mulian's journey.

But Miaofu was not there to join the festivities. She had died in the night.

TEN

The Widow's Tale

AH-LONG, 888–947

I offer this incense to announce the misfortunes that rain down upon me as fast as the lightning sent by the god Luling. I beg that my prayers will reach the ears of the Star God Rahu, and that he will force the 100 demons that beset me to go far away, that he will strengthen the power of the good spirits, let my illnesses fade away day after day, year after year. I entreat him for happiness and blessing, for the end of my misfortunes and to pardon my sins.

Prayer of a sixty-four-year-old woman[1]

Widow Ah-long carefully unwrapped the small bundle she had bought from the pharmacist.[2] It was a special order, and the pharmacist's boy had come to tell her of its arrival that morning while she was still struggling to get dressed. Rare medicines such as this were expensive, and Ah-long gave thanks to Buddha for her recent victory in the courts. Now she was assured some income from her land to pay for such purchases. Whether it would be sufficient to cover her gambling debts remained to be seen, but at least she had something to leave to her grandson. She finished the

unwrapping, and the bundle revealed its treasure—what looked like several small, shriveled white worms.

It was 947, and Ah-long, who was in her sixtieth year, suffered badly from joint swelling, pain, and fevers. She had tried everything, from the usual herbal remedies, acupuncture, and massage to exorcism and prayer (see figure 31), but every winter the pain grew worse. She could no longer use her hands and found it difficult to dress. Fortunately, she still had her servant girl to help her around the house. A friend had told her of a special medicine—a worm found only on snowy mountain peaks—that was said to be especially efficacious in the treatment of rheumatoid fevers.3 She had asked the pharmacist to procure some. That had been almost a year ago, and he had not been able to obtain that medicine until a few days ago, when a Tibetan trading party, regular suppliers of drugs from the Tibetan plateau, had passed through town after a long absence.

FIGURE 31. The Star God, Rahu, after a ninth-century manuscript prayer sheet from Dunhuang. (The British Library, Or.8210/S.5656. Drawing by author.)

Ah-long was one of the most senior members of the community. She had outlived her husband, her son, and numerous cousins, and most of her friends were also dead. Yet her own life had been punctuated by illness. Her first memory was of lying in bed doubled up with a stomachache. She could not remember how old she had been, but she did recall her father setting off for town to buy medicine. He had come back the next evening with turmeric root, which her mother ground into powder and forced her to swallow.4 Colic was to plague her throughout her childhood, and she had soon got used to the yellow medicine. As an adult, she kept a supply of turmeric in the house and took it as a prophylactic

before heavy meals.

Her parents ran a public hostel some miles northeast of the city of Dunhuang, halfway to the next town. There were no villages on this stretch of road, just inns with mud and tamarisk-stalk walls sheltering under a few poplar trees next to a well or a spring. The Dunhuang government provided the innkeepers with supplies—grain, fodder, and firewood—but it was a meager living.[5] The surrounding land was covered with a soggy crust of salt, and nothing could be grown on it. Even the camels hated it, and their drivers were often in bad humor when they reached the inn after a day spent dealing with the recalcitrant, spitting beasts.

The next major event in Ah-long's childhood was also associated with illness, though this time she was one of the few people who were not stricken. It was the start of summer, and an epidemic hit Dunhuang. The military governor sent an urgent letter to the Buddhist abbot in charge of the monasteries and nunneries of the Hexi corridor in which he attributed the plague to the spiritual shortcomings of the monks and nuns. The abbot replied at once, promising that the institutions under his control would immediately begin a continuous service of confession and prayer and all-night sutra recitations.[6] Ah-long's parents heard of the plague from travelers, perhaps those same travelers who brought the infection. In a few days, both her parents had fallen ill. Ah-long's uncle and aunt in Dunhuang were informed, but by the time they arrived, her parents were dead.

Ah-long's uncle and aunt lived in Dunhuang itself but farmed land outside the city walls. Several years before, they had lived in a hamlet closer to their land, but then Azha bandits came over the mountains from Koko-nor in a raiding party and abducted their young son.[7] Ah-long's uncle and a posse of local men, all of whom had lost children, animals, or property to the raiders, rode after them. They were gone

several weeks but returned empty-handed. Unable to find the raiders, they had not dared to travel too far into Azha territory. After this, from time to time Ah-long's uncle would join local posses or any group of travelers heading south, hoping that he would recognize his son among the herdsmen on the pastures of the Tsaidam basin or near Koko-nor, for though he and his wife had other children, all were girls.

The family was not rich, but they could afford to employ seasonal laborers to help work the fields (see figure 32). In addition to their laborers' wages—usually paid in the form of grain and clothes for the summer's work[8]—they had to pay taxes to the local government. As head of the household, Ah-long's uncle was also liable to corvée duty—a period of unpaid labor for the government—but he usually paid someone to do that for him as well. The local government taxes consisted of payment both in grain and in cloth—more common currencies at this time than copper cash or silver ingots.[9] For each *mu* of land (roughly one-seventh of an acre), a householder paid 4 *sheng* of wheat (one *sheng* was approximately 3 pints), 3.5 *sheng* of millet, and 0.5 *sheng* of hemp. In addition, one bolt of cloth (about 30 feet) was levied for every 250–300 *mu* of land, and, since most farmers did not own this much, the tax was shared between neighbors. The cloth tax was paid at the start of summer, and the grain tax after the harvest. Each household was also responsible for maintaining the network of irrigation channels that threaded between the small fields and for supplying the local authorities with firewood. The firewood, tamarisk, and poplar wood gathered from the surrounding area was used in military beacon towers.

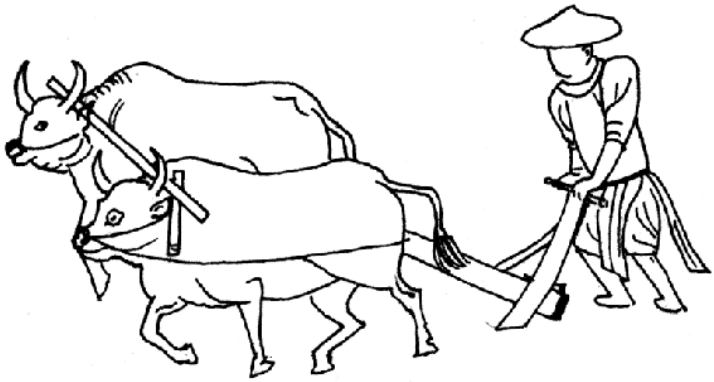

FIGURE 32. Ploughing scene from a Dunhuang cave temple, seventh century. (Dunhuang Yulin cave 15. Drawing by author.)

Ah-long was a striking girl. Her parents both spoke Chinese but they were each the result of several mixed marriages between the different peoples of the Silk Road. Ah-long did not know it, but she had Chinese, Tibetan, and Turkic ancestry. Her combination of black hair and green eyes was not an uncommon sight in Dunhuang, but nevertheless people commented on her beauty. She was married at seventeen. She and her future husband had encountered each other several times at festivals, and Ah-long's aunt had soon contacted his parents to ask if they were interested in a match. A go-between was then employed to make the necessary arrangements. The groom's family owned a small parcel of land north of the city, near the military beacons and ruined Chinese fortifications, but most of their income came from property: they owned several houses in the city that were rented out. Laborers were employed to work their land. It was not very productive, because it was hard to till and irrigate, but they kept it because the geomancers had said that it was ideally situated for burials, and on it stood the family graves. The family consulted a diviner to establish an auspicious day for the wedding, and the diviner in turn consulted an almanac. Ah-

long had been born in the year of the rat and her fiancé in the year of the ox.10 The almanac advised that those born in the year of the rat should only marry between the fifth and the eleventh month, and those in the year of the ox between the third and the sixth month. That left only two possible months, and, as the almanac showed, only three days in those months were noted as being suitable for weddings. Having looked at the birthdays of the bride and groom, the diviner selected the most propitious of the three days.

Marriage among aristocratic Chinese families was a complex affair.11 First the day was chosen for an exchange of cards containing information about each family, the bride's dowry, and the groom's property. If all was satisfactory to both sides, the "ceremony of the cups" followed on another lucky day, during which promises and cups of wine were exchanged between bride and groom. Then both families exchanged presents. The bride's family's gifts traditionally included two sticks and two bowls with four red fish swimming in them, fish being symbolic of abundance. The wealthiest families sent sticks and fish made of gold. More gifts were exchanged before the day arranged for the wedding itself, again chosen by a diviner, and the bride's dowry was displayed on the eve of the wedding. On the wedding day itself, the groom came to the bride's house to claim her. She would be dressed entirely in red and carried in a sedan chair or carriage back to his house in a colorful and noisy procession, complete with musicians and singers. There the bride and groom drank more rice wine to seal their vows, and everyone sat down to a great banquet in celebration.

Poorer families only performed some of these ceremonies, though the banquet was obligatory, and in some cases the groom lived with the bride. But Ah-long's family followed the tradition, exchanging gifts and, on the chosen day, Ah-long was carried in a sedan chair to the groom's house, where she

and he exchanged cups of wine to symbolize their vows. Everyone they knew was invited to the banquet, and all of them remarked on how well Ah-long was treated by her uncle and aunt, who had provided an impressive dowry. Ah-long herself did not remember her wedding day with any great joy: her period pains had started on the morning of the wedding, which her aunt declared a very bad omen. Ah-long had taken an infusion of herbs, and her aunt had heated a stone and wrapped it in a silk cloth which Ah-long held against her stomach during the rather uncomfortable journey to her future husband's house.

The wedding procession did not have far to go, but the groom's family wanted to show off their wealth and had employed a large band for the occasion. The beating of the drums and the shrill horns reverberated off the mud walls of the houses crowded along the narrow streets. Shopkeepers and stallholders all stopped their trade and stood watching from the side of the road while the children ran along in the bright sunshine beside the men, adding to the noise and clamor.

A sexual handbook circulating in Dunhuang at the time, written in central China, described the events of the wedding night:

> The groom takes out his Crimson Bird and loosens the bride's red trousers, His white stalk rises and she strokes it and delights it . . . the man's tongue seeks the woman's and their minds are joined together. . . . Then he moistens his penis with his saliva and offers it to her vagina like making an offering to an altar . . . the "boy" then ejects his abundant semen into her. Afterward they wipe their private parts with special cloths which are placed in a basket. From this moment on they are wedded and their joining of yin and yang will continue without interruption.12

After the wedding, Ah-long lived with her husband and in-laws. A popular poem circulating locally at the time provided an ironic comment on the effect of marriage and in-laws on a

headstrong young woman. “The Shrewish Young Wife” describes a young woman who hits her husband and screams abuse, seemingly for no reason other than it is her nature. When her parents-in-law try to reprimand her, she refuses to listen, upsetting all the pots and pans in the kitchen in her rage. Her anger, the poem says, “is like fighting water buffaloes, and her laugh like the creaking of a rusty winch.”13

After more arguments with her mother-in-law, the young woman in the poem takes to her bed, feigning illness, and refuses to get up. When her husband enters the room, tears come to her eyes, and she tells him that his parents treat her like a servant or a slave. Her husband does nothing, and she asks for a divorce. The in-laws are jubilant: “We’ll give you back your clothes and those items which originally came from your home, and we’ve even made a new cover for your bed, but go quickly and promise that we’ll never see or meet you again.” The young woman leaves with the remark: “I may have neither wealth nor achievements, but at least I’m leaving the home of these old devils.”

Divorce was allowed under Chinese law in cases of mutual incompatibility or where a wife disobeyed her parents-in-law. Divorce certificates in such cases began with an account of what marriage should be: “mutual affection like that between water and fish.”14 But the text continued: “The union of cream and milk will eventually separate into two streams. How can a cat and a mouse live for long in the same home? Having consulted with our fathers and their children, with our elder and younger brothers, with their wives and children, we are no longer to be called husband and wife.” The certificate did not mention the problems attendant upon moving into someone else’s home as a junior member.

In the poem, the young woman resettles in a village where she is “free and at ease.” The poem notes that she ignored

convention. Because she did not like “women’s work,” she went to the fields with a bamboo basket on her arm to collect vegetables and managed to look after herself. “Dear mother-in-law,” she says, “it is in my nature to be wayward. If you had wanted me to perform the proper duties of a wife, then you needed to peel away many layers of my skin.”

The poem ends with the moral that it is essential to know all about the woman you chose as a daughter-in-law, and that it is no good relying on the information given by matchmakers. Unlike Shakespeare’s Kate, the shrew in this case was saved by divorce rather than by marriage. However, the young wife’s quarrel was always with her in-laws and not with her husband. In refusing to defy his parents, he behaved like a filial son, but doing so lost him his wife.

Ah-long did not get divorced—it does not seem to have been common at the time—but she did get pregnant. This was the next defining moment of her life, and, as usual, it was an uncomfortable one. Her labor was protracted and extremely painful. To ease the birth, she was given medicine containing the powdered seeds of the balsam flower, and her mother-in-law burned charms under the bed.15 Everyone was surprised when both she and the baby survived. Moreover, it was a boy.

After the birth, Ah-long was very weak from loss of blood. The monk-doctor prescribed an Indian drug called *citragandha*. It was mixed with wine and contained tamarisk manna, pine resin, licorice, *rehmannia* root, and something called “hot blood.” A sample of the drug had been sent to China in the eighth century by an Indian king, and a Chinese *materia medica* noted that “foreigners test the efficacy of the drug by taking a small child and cutting off its foot. They put the drug in its mouth then make it stand up. If the child is able to walk, then the drug is of good quality.”16 Needless to say, tall stories about the barbaric practices of foreigners were as endemic then in China and along the Tarim basin as

they were elsewhere.

Ah-long tried to breast feed the baby herself, but without much success. Her mother-in-law made an eggplant poultice for her cracked nipples and offered advice, but eventually they resorted to a wet nurse.17 After the birth of her first child, Ah-long suffered a succession of miscarriages and, when she did not miscarry, she gave birth to weak, sickly babies who died within hours or days. After each failed pregnancy, she and her husband went to the local Buddhist temple and paid the monks to say prayers for the dead child. But at least they had a son to continue the family line, unlike the poor women whom they saw at the temple praying for a son in front of the image of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.18

Ah-long and her husband grew prosperous. A few years after their wedding, her husband's parents died and left him all their property—he was the only surviving child. Ah-long also received a share of her uncle and aunt's land; the rest was divided between her cousins and sister. All the land needed careful management, and their tenants sometimes defaulted on the rent, but each year they had a surplus after their taxes and debts had been paid. They could even afford to make occasional loans themselves at interest. They were able to avoid having to borrow grain for each year's sowing and to buy a servant girl to help Ah-long. Ah-long enjoyed having someone to fetch and carry for her. They had received the young girl as payment for a debt of three pieces of raw silk and two pieces of spun silk owed them by a local petty official.19 She was an Azha girl, captured during one of the skirmishes between the local army and marauding families, and so was considered a prisoner-of-war slave, able to be bought and sold. It seemed as if the standard prayer that the bridegroom had recited on their wedding day was being fulfilled:

> Gold and silver to fill my coffers year after year,
> Wheat and rice to fill my barns at every harvest.

Chinese slaves to look after these treasures,
Foreign slaves to tend my livestock,
Fleet-footed slaves to attend me when I ride,
Strong slaves to till the fields,
Beautiful slaves to strum the harp and fill my wine cup,
Slender-waisted slaves to sing and dance,
Midgets to hold the candle by my dining couch.[20]

When Ah-long looked back on her life, memories of her marriage were crowded out by earlier and later events. But, for a while, life had been good. She could afford to make offerings to the monastery, to gamble with her friends, and to have fine new clothes made from time to time. She was clever with her hands and embroidered sutra wrappers from old silk that she presented to Miaofu, the abbess of the local nunnery and a particular friend.[21] The remnants were made into scent bags for other friends. She also made incense using her paternal grandmother's recipe, which called for aloeswood, sandalwood, storax, onycha, Borneo camphor, and musk to be ground together, strained through gauze, and mixed with honey.[22] She found gambling more enjoyable, however, though this was not something that she admitted to the abbess. She and her female friends played several games, including mah-jong and cards, but their favourite was double-sixes. Akin to backgammon, this was played with black and white counters moved by two players according to the throw of the dice. The women sat in the dappled shade of the courtyard on low wooden stools, with painted legs and padded silk cushions, hunched intently over the delicately carved double-six table.[23] They gambled for small amounts, only a few copper coins, but in the teahouses and wineshops of Dunhuang men gambled for larger stakes, and everyone placed bets at the polo games and horse races held outside the city.[24]

Two tragedies then struck and changed Ah-long's life.

First, her husband died at the age of fifty. He fell ill without warning and, despite the efforts of doctors, monks, and exorcists, he had died within three days. She was still in mourning when her son was arrested. He had been called to civil defense duty, and his task was to guard the large statue of the Buddha at the cave temples southeast of the town during reconstruction work.25 The civil defense team, able-bodied men of the neighborhood, were issued weapons—bows and arrows, shields and spears—that they were obliged to return at the end of their duty. Any delay in returning the arms warranted seven strokes of the wooden cane, but Ah-long's son did not return the weapons at all. This was a far more serious offense. Trade in weapons was forbidden without official sanction, because the authorities were worried that they might fall into the hands of bandits and foreign armies. The case had to be reported and investigated. Ah-long's son had fled, but he was soon tracked down and arrested.26

Ah-long's son had married several years before, but his wife had died while giving birth to their son. Ah-long, her son, and grandson continued to live together, supported by the produce of their land. After her son was arrested, Ah-long found it difficult to manage affairs. She was not like the young wife in the poem; she had depended on her husband and son to deal with matters outside the home. It was they who decided what crops to grow, whether extra laborers were needed, and when to harvest.

When it was decided that the son should be confined to prison in a neighboring town to await trial, the court drew up a document that gave Ah-long's brother-in-law the right to work the land for the duration of the son's absence. He was to be responsible for buying grain, sowing, and harvesting. He was also to pay the tax due on the land and undertake corvée duty. Before the son was taken away, he and his uncle were brought before the judge, and the contract was read

out to them. The land was to be handed back to the son when he returned and, if either side broke the agreement, they were to pay a penalty of one sheep. Having made sure that both parties understood the terms, the judge, who was also the scribe, wrote their names at the end of the contract, along with that of a witness, and all four men signed the document. Only the judge was literate and could write his name. The rest made various marks; it was common to place the forefinger on the contract under the name and to make three horizontal marks at the position of the finger joints.27

Immediately after this, Ah-long sold over a third of the land to the witness, a distant relative, to raise money to try to help her son's case. A few bribes to the right people, she thought, would do no harm. She also gave money to her friend Miaofu for prayers to be said in the local nunnery. Her brother-in-law was happy to manage the rest of the land and to give her part of its produce. This was not considered rent by either party; after all, they were family and had an obligation to help one another.

Later that year came news that Ah-long's son had died in custody. She had not managed to make any headway in securing her son's release, and she decided not to make too many enquiries about the cause of his death: this was an area of the law that was best avoided. But she arranged his funeral and memorial services, and she spent long hours praying to Avalokiteśvara to save her son from rebirth as an animal, a hungry ghost, or a demon in hell.28 After this, she was to be found at the temple almost every day.

Like many women in Dunhuang, Ah-long belonged to a women's club; it met regularly in a small building on the grounds of the nunnery.29 Sometimes a nun or monk would speak to them about Buddhism, and at other times they would read sutras and say prayers together. Details of each meeting were sent round on a circular, giving the time and place and a list of all the members.30 Most of the women

were illiterate, but they could get a local monk to read the text and point out their names on the list. Each made their own mark after their name and passed the circular on to the next person. Often, however, news of the meeting was simply passed around verbally. Nevertheless, the club president still wrote the circular as a record.

The aims and objectives of the club were set down on paper after they had been approved at the founding meeting. “Our parents give us life,” the document read, “but friends enhance its value. They sustain us in time of danger and rescue us from calamity. In dealing with friends, a single word may serve as a bond of faith. On feast days the members of the mutual benefit society are each to contribute 1 cup of oil, 1 pound of white flour and 10 *sheng* of wine, and on the day in the first month set apart for the establishment of merit, they are to contribute 10 *sheng* of wine and 1 bowl of lamp oil. If any member disregards procedure in either great or small matters or creates a disturbance at a feast and refuses to obey the orders of her superior, then all the members will repair to the gateway and fine her enough wine-syrup for an entire feast. . . . Any person wishing to leave the club shall be sentenced to three strokes with the bamboo.”[31]

The fifteen members of Ah-long’s club, including the four officers, had all signed with their marks to indicate that “they swear by the hills and streams, with the sun and moon as witnesses” to its terms. The document concluded with an explanation as to its purpose: “As a precaution against bad faith, these rules have been written down to serve as a memorandum for those who come after.”

Members made regular contributions to the club, usually of grain. The last to arrive at each meeting and those who did not turn up at all also had to pay a forfeit. Sometimes this was paid in grain wine, sometimes in the more expensive wine made from locally grown grapes. The members of the

club were each guaranteed funeral expenses from the club's assets. This was very important to the women, for many of them were old and poor. The club also arranged memorial services so that, unlike Mulian's mother in the famous story, its members would not end up in hell.32 Most of them also tried to influence their fate by giving donations to the nunnery itself and by taking the five vows: not to kill, steal, lie, drink or have illicit sex. The donations of wine and the frequent mention of wine at Buddhist banquets suggest that at least one of these prohibitions was not strictly adhered to.33 Clubs composed of wealthier townswomen could afford to sponsor paintings on silk or a mural at the temple caves, thus gaining more merit for their members.34

Immediately after the death of Ah-long's son, her brother-in-law was recruited to the militia to fight armed bandits who were making frequent raids on outlying villages. He was gone for several months, and the land was left to lie fallow. Ah-long remembered how her cousin had been snatched by bandits over four decades earlier. His parents, who had been dead for several years, had never found him and had assumed he was dead. As if in response to her thoughts, a man rode into town while her brother-in-law was away and claimed to be the very same boy, and he went straight to the local government office and told his story. He said he had been part of the recent raiding party but had managed to escape with two horses when the party was close to Dunhuang. He had been only a small boy when he was seized and taken to Koko-nor with his Azha captors, but he always remembered that Dunhuang was his hometown. Although he could not recall the location of either his parents' house or their land, he knew his Chinese name. He wanted, he said, to make a claim on any land that was his: he had no other means of livelihood.

The officials believed his story, and, when their preliminary enquiries showed that his family had originally owned land,

part of which now appeared to be uncultivated, they awarded it to him without further investigation, giving him a certificate of rightful ownership as head of the household. This was Ah-long's land. The officials also bought his horses, paying him in grain and cloth. The young man moved onto the land and set up home. Ah-long was amazed when she heard of this, but she did not want to get into trouble with the local authorities and decided to wait until her brother-in-law returned before challenging the squatter's rights. In any case, she was still quite comfortably off , not yet having spent all of the money from the earlier sale of part of the land.

Her brother-in-law returned after only a few months and was as taken aback as she at the turn of affairs. He went to question the man to see if he was indeed who he claimed to be. The man was quite rude, refusing to answer questions or to relinquish possession of the land. He showed Ah-long's brother-in-law the document issued by the officials that identified him as head of the household. Since there was no one left alive who could remember the young boy and so dispute this claim, the widow and her brother-in-law decided to let things be.

They never did find out if the man was who he said he was. Almost as suddenly as had come, he disappeared again. They heard that he had grown used to a nomadic lifestyle and could not bear the monotony and toil of "the bitter land," as he called it. He bought a horse, packed a saddlebag, and rode back southeast over the Nanshan mountains to rejoin his adopted family at Koko-nor. But their troubles were not over. During his brief stay, the man had become friendly with one of Ah-long's many relations, a young man she hardly knew who came from a poor family and was only distantly related. He had been brought up in a monastery and had no land or other wealth of his own. When the stranger left town, the young man himself moved onto the land, claiming a right to it as the man's nephew.

For the next decade, the young man refused to surrender the land and, worse still, refused to give Ah-long any of its produce. Her fortunes declined. She found herself gambling more and more, and her debts mounted. She had to sell or pawn many of her possessions and, one winter, even had to borrow a cooking pot from a local monk. She could no longer afford to give generous gifts to the monastery and was simply glad that her funeral at least was assured by her regular donations to the club. She tried to make more embroidered scent bags and other items to sell, but rheumatoid arthritis soon made her joints too painful and stiff for sewing.

By the time her grandson was near maturity, she and her brother-in-law decided they had to do something to regain the land, otherwise there would be nothing for the grandson. How would he find a decent wife without some property to his name? Despite the costs and the risk that they might lose, they took their case to court. Ah-long still had a copy of the agreement made after her son's arrest between him and his uncle, but this was the only piece of written evidence, the land registers being too out of date. A clerk took depositions from Ah-long, her brother-in-law, and the young man that he copied out, along with the original contract, and presented to the official appointed to try the case.

The judge's decision was appended to the document containing the depositions. He noted that the squatter, though claiming distant kinship with Ah-long, gave her nothing from the land, "not a needle nor a blade of grass." He also noted that the widow had no other means of support in her old age. He therefore found in her favor, awarding her the land and its water.[35]

Widow Ah-long was able to live out the rest of her life in reasonable security. Her grandson would soon be old enough to work the land himself. Every year at the Confucian festival to honor their ancestors, held 105 days after the winter solstice, they went together to his father's grave, taking

various offerings and food for a picnic once they had weeded and swept the grave and made their offerings. Ah-long continued to gamble, but now she could also afford to pay for prayers to relieve her arthritis and all the other misfortunes that she perceived as “raining down upon her as quick as lightning.” In fact, her life was no better nor worse than that of the tens of thousands of farmers who tilled “the bitter land” of the Tarim.

ELEVEN

The Artist's Tale

DONG BAODE, 965–966

While common artists concentrate on the outline, Master Wu's strokes are split and scattered. While others try carefully to emulate the exact shape of the subject, Master Wu was above such vulgar techniques. In painting curves, absolutely straight lines, upright pillars or connecting roof beams, Master Wu did not make any use of a ruler or foot measure. He painted curly beards and long tufts of hair waving and fluttering from the temples of his subjects with such an abundance of strength that the hairs seem to be detaching themselves from the flesh. He must have been possessor of a great secret which no one understands now. He could start a picture eight foot high from either the arms or the legs and make a strange and marvellous subject which was so alive that it seemed to have blood circulating under the skin.

ON THE ARTIST WU DAOZI, in *Lidai minghua ji* (*Record of Famous Painters through the Ages*), 847[1]

Dong Baode was the manager of the local Painting Guild and a Master Painter, a member of the government Painting Academy in the town of Dunhuang.[2] It was 965, and Dunhuang, though offering nominal allegiance to the new

Song dynasty in China, had been ruled by the local Cao family since 920.[3] Cao Yuanzhong (r. 944–74), who called himself king, was the current ruler and Baode's patron.

In addition to the Painting Academy, King Cao had established a government printing bureau. Lei Yanmei was employed there as an official woodblock printer.[4] Like Baode, much of Yanmei's work was commissioned by the king, and the two men often met in a local teahouse to discuss what they were doing over a game of double-sixes.[5] Yanmei's work involved carving both text and illustrations, but he was neither a scribe nor a painter. When the king commissioned a printed prayer sheet with a picture of the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara at the top and a prayer beneath, a scribe wrote the text and an artist drew the picture on separate thin sheets.[6] Yanmei then pasted the paper ink-side down on a block of wood that had been cut and smoothed for the purpose. He often used local pearwood or jujube, both smooth and evenly textured, or, if he could get hold of it, wood from the catalpa tree, but this last had to be imported and was expensive. The ink was clearly visible through the paper, and Yanmei deftly chiseled out the wood in the spaces between, leaving the characters standing proud. He then carved a separate block for the picture. Next, the two woodblocks were inked, and coarse, locally made paper was laid on top and rubbed with a dry brush. The printed sheets were then distributed to local monasteries (see figure 33). The woodblock of the illustration was also later reused separately to make multiple images of the bodhisattva. This was commissioned by Cao Yuanzhong in 947 to mark the Ghost Festival:

> The disciple Cao Yuanzhong, Military Governor of the Returning to Allegiance Army District, Inspector for Guazhou and Shazhou, Commissioner for the distribution of military land allotments in the sphere of his jurisdiction and for the suppression of the Tibetan tribes, specially promoted Grand Preceptor, and Inaugural Marquis of Qiaojun,

ordered this block to be carved for printing so that the City God may enjoy peace and prosperity, that the whole prefecture may be tranquil, that the roads east and westwards may remain open, that evil-doers north and south may be reformed, that diseases may disappear, that the sound of the war gong may no longer be heard, that pleasure may attend both eye and ear, and that all may be steeped in happiness and good fortune.7

King Cao and his wife, Lady Zhai, were assiduous patrons of Buddhism throughout their reign. In the years after the commissioning of the prayer, they donated numerous items to local monasteries, all of which were carefully recorded. For the New Year in 948, another traditional time of celebration and giving, Lady Zhai presented a sutra wrapper "embroidered in a great variety of colours."8 Sutra scrolls were stored in bundles of ten or so on the library shelves inside rectangular wrappers faced with cloth and often lined with old paper. A catalog tag was inscribed with details of the contents of the bundle, for example, "30th bundle of the *Prajñāpāramitāsūtra*."9 The tag was attached to the edge of the wrapper so that it was visible once the bundle was placed on a shelf.

Among the items donated by her husband during this period was a roll of fine paper that had been made in workshops in China with paper pulp from hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) and the bark of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*).10 The paper was produced in a mold, a rectangular wooden frame with narrow bars, across which was laid a screen made of reeds or fine bamboo strips, held in place by hemp or horsehair threads. Paper pulp was poured in the mold and evenly distributed, and the resulting sheet was turned out to dry. By this time, in a further refinement, the paper makers were also placing a fine silk sheet on the screen to prevent the impression of lines from the screen on the finished paper. Once dry, the paper sheets were brushed with size and dyed with *huangbo,* a yellow

pigment extracted from the bark of the Amur cork tree (*Phellodendron amurense*).[11] The pigment had insecticidal and water-repellent properties. Such fine paper was used to make library copies of sutras, but it had been rare in Dunhuang ever since the Tibetans had occupied the city in 787, and printers and scribes generally had to make do with much rougher, locally made paper. They also rummaged through old stores of documents, mainly contracts and other administrative works dating from the Tibetan period. Some of these were only written on one side and could be reused. Most were undyed. Scraps were given to the schoolteacher for his pupils' writing exercises.[12]

FIGURE 33. Printed prayer sheet prepared by the woodblock carver Lei Yanmei, tenth century. (The British Library, Or.8210/P.20.)

King Cao also commissioned paintings, both portable works on silk and murals on the walls of local cave temples.13 Many followed the king’s example, and professional painters such as Baode were kept busy. Baode had reason to be pleased with life. He had reached the top of

his profession several years before, and he now made a comfortable living. He had an official title that, though it was junior, still gave him additional status in the local community.14 There must have been drawbacks to his job, such as dealing with officious bureaucrats and lazy workmen, but his was skilled and relatively well paid work. There was also plenty of it. Over fifteen monasteries and nunneries were situated in and around Dunhuang, and, most important of all, the cave temples were some twelve miles southeast of the town, known as the Mogao Caves.15

At that site, an east-facing cliff rose irregularly above a small stream to a height of over a hundred feet and extended in each direction for about a mile. Poplars and elms grew next to the stream, which carried little water except during the summer floods. Since the fourth century, monks and lay Buddhists traveling the Silk Road had excavated caves in several tiers along the cliff face, first as meditation cells and later as places of worship, paying for elaborate murals and painted clay statues to adorn them. Much of Baode's work consisted of renovating paintings in existing caves and decorating newly commissioned caves.

Three years earlier, in 962, Baode had supervised the decoration of one such newly excavated cave sponsored by King Cao.16 The excavation itself had been carried out by unskilled laborers. A space was chosen at the foot of the cliff to erect scaffolding to the height of the proposed cave's roof. By the mid-tenth century, most of the cliff had been used, and hundreds of caves honey-combed its yellow rock joined by wooden walkways and steps. Often old caves were reworked, sometimes being extended or simply overpainted, and several additional cave sites had come into use around the town.17

The conglomerate from which the cliff was formed was extremely friable and not difficult to excavate: only picks and

shovels were needed. The workmen started at roof-level and worked into the cliff and downward, the debris being taken away in baskets. The work was hot, dirty, and tiring, and the workmen were hampered by the wind that swept across the cliff face, bringing down sand from the dunes above the rock. As partial payment for their services, they were fed in the monastery on the valley floor.18 Monastery officials visited every few days to survey progress and decide on the eventual size of the cave. The king was their most important patron, and they wanted to ensure that the work was well executed—and fell within budget.

Once the preliminary excavation work had been done, the roof and walls were chiseled out further by stonemasons, and the floor was tamped to make it flat and smooth. The cave consisted of a small antechamber, joined to the main chamber by a short passage. The uppermost walls of the main chamber sloped toward a coffered roof, and in the center of the chamber a wall of stone with a U-shaped platform in front was left standing.

The excavation complete, a team of plasterers took over, covering the rock walls with a thick straw-and-clay stucco, overlaid with a fine slip.19 In the desert heat, this did not take long to dry. The paintings were to be murals rather than frescos, painted on a dry surface. The laborers and stonemasons were paid off with grain and a meal, and the plasterer received three liters of hemp oil in addition.20

Various paintings had been commissioned to adorn the walls and ceiling by wealthy individuals: there were to be several on the main register of each wall, including various paradise scenes, events from the *Avalokiteśvarasūtra,* and the story of the monk Śāriputra subjugating demons. This last was very popular at the time; similar depictions had been made in other caves, and Baode had only to look through his files to find guide sketches for the composition.21 Before starting work, he spent a morning in the cave, measuring its

dimensions and, in his head, laying out the various scenes. He then ordered his young apprentices to mark up the wall. To do so they dipped string in red powder, held it taut near the wall and then flicked it so that the powder transferred itself from the string to the wall, thus defining the limits of each horizontal register and of each main composition. The main events of the story of Śāriputra occupied nine panels on the lower register of the south wall, and other scenes from the story were shown on the west wall.

The story tells of the chief minister of a kingdom in southern India whose "moral purchase is as important as salt and pepper are for cooking" but who is not yet a Buddhist.[22] He has several sons, the youngest of whom has yet to marry. In order to find his son a wife, he dispatches a trusted servant with gold, bracelets of fine jade, bolts of silk brocade and gauze, and a hundred elephants: "Even when the stars come out at night you must not rest . . . should you gratify my son's wishes a handsome reward awaits you." A suitable girl, the daughter of the premier of another kingdom, is duly found, and the chief minister goes to stay with the girl's family to discuss the marriage. There he learns of Buddhism and, filled with a desire to know more, sets out to find Buddha, guided by a light sent by Buddha himself and thereupon "he suddenly awakens to a state of enlightenment." Buddha designates a fellow countryman, the young monk Śāriputra, to be his guide, and the two return to their kingdom to find a place where they can invite the Buddha to preach. After some searching, they locate a suitable park that they purchase, at great cost, from the crown prince. But the Six Masters of the heretical doctrines of the kingdom are not happy. In the words of the storyteller:

> Filled with anger,
> They puffed up their cheeks, arched their eyebrows,
> Gnashed their teeth and bared their gums.
> They were extraordinarily irate.[23]

They inform the king, and the chief minister is detained for interrogation. The king, hearing his chief minister's eulogy of Buddha, decides that the question can only be decided by a competition between the two religions. The chief minister is delighted: "The youngest of Buddha's disciples," he asserts, "will be able to withstand the heretics," and he volunteers Śāriputra as the Buddhist protagonist.

A great arena is constructed south of the city for the competition. The king announces that, if the Buddhists win, then he and all his countrymen will be converted. If they lose, then Śāriputra and the chief minister will be executed. The chief minister is, naturally, anxious, but Śāriputra reassures him: "This contest between the heretics and myself is like taking a fish and giving it to an otter." Nevertheless, Śāriputra disappears just before the contest. The chief minister is distraught and rushes out to find him. This is not difficult, for he is the only shaven-headed man in the kingdom, and Śāriputra is found in meditation, calling on Buddha to invest him with the necessary powers for the contest. They proceed to the arena, the Buddhists sitting to the east, the heretics to the west, the king to the north, and the commoners to the south.

In the contest, each side in turn conjures up extraordinary visions. The heretical monk starts with a precious mountain whose peak reaches to the Milky Way and which is covered with sightseeing immortals. Not surprisingly, the spectators gasp in amazement. Śāriputra responds by calling up a Diamond God, his feet a thousand miles square and his eyebrows "as bushy as the twin summits of a forested mountain." The spectators decide in favor of the Diamond God. The next two visions are of a water buffalo and a lion, respectively, again both enormous. The lion seizes the water buffalo and snaps its spine, at which the buffalo breaks into pieces (see figure 34).

Then the heretical monk creates a vast lake, but Śāriputra

conjures up an elephant that sucks up all the lake water in its trunk. By this time, the heretical monk “is flushed and flaxen, his lips and mouth parched, and his innards feel as if a knife is being twisted in them.” But he is determined to beat Śāriputra and, using all his magical powers, conjures up a poisonous dragon that blocks out the sun and makes the earth tremble. The spectators are terrified, but Śāriputra remains calm, conjuring up in turn a bird that repeatedly attacks the dragon from the air, eating it bit by bit until nothing remains.

Despite these defeats, the contest continues with the heretical monk calling up two monsters. Before Śāriputra can decide how to counter them, one of the Heavenly Kings, Buddha’s attendants, arrives of his own accord to confront the monsters. They throw themselves to the ground in awe and beg for their lives. Undeterred, the heretical monk calls up a giant tree. Śāriputra counters with a God of Wind, who opens his bag and lets the wind blow until the tree is destroyed. At this, the king finally declares that the Buddhists have won. The heretics are tonsured and obliged to embrace Buddhism.

The story of Śāriputra was a mainstay of the traveling storyteller, who set up his pitch in the marketplace and at temple fairs. As he told the story, he would remove the appropriate scrolls from his rucksack and unfurl them one by one, pointing at the scroll as he spoke and embellishing various details. All except the very young knew what was going to happen next, but they enjoyed the retelling nonetheless.

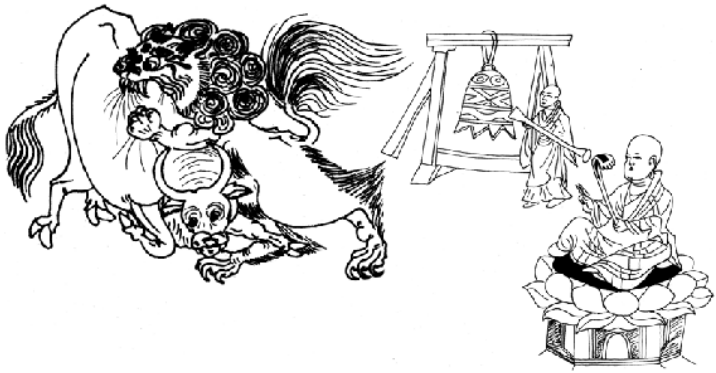

FIGURE 34. The story of Śāriputra: the Buddhist lion devouring the heretic monk's water buffalo. From a ninth- to tenth-century illustrated manuscript from Dunhuang. (Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 4524. Drawing by author.)

The depiction of the story on the cave wall was, of necessity, different in format. The narrative was enclosed in frames all visible at once and not revealed in stages as in the scrolls of the storyteller, but the paintings offered great scope for movement, drama, and imagination. Sketches stored in the Painting Academy provided the overall design, with rough blocks of each scene and various marks to show their order and placement. There were also rough sketches of the two main protagonists. However, the detail was left to the imagination of the artist. Baode had worked on this story since he was a young apprentice and knew it well, but younger, less experienced artists would do much of the work, and the sketches were vital for them.

Once the measuring was complete, Baode and other artists sketched the outlines of the first main design with animal-hair brushes and carbon-black ink. They drew freehand, some using the sketches as guides. The next stage was to fill in the detail and color. Baode had already checked the atelier's stock of paints, powder, brushes, and other materials and had ordered in new supplies, leaving the actual preparation of the paint to more junior artists. The paints

were made from mineral and organic pigments, some of them imported.24 Azurite and malachite, the basic carbonates of copper, were traditionally used for blue and green, though in caves farther west, near Kucha, lapis lazuli from mines across the Pamir mountains was more widely used. The pigments came in several grades, but a basic distinction was made between the dark, coarse grinds and the lighter, fine grinds. Cinnabar and minium were used for red; litharge, orpiment, and ochre for yellow; and ceruse for white. Organic dyes were also used, including indigo, red lac, safflower, madder, logwood, gromwell, and gamboge, a yellow tree-sap imported from Cambodia.25

Before noon, the group of artists would stop work and descend to the dining hall of the monastery on the valley floor below the cliff. There they were given a meal in partial payment for their services.26 They worked hard, and it was not long before the coloring of the main figures was complete: Śāriputra sitting on a lotus throne under a large canopy, with the heretical monk facing him across the arena. Baode then took a fine brush and ink to overpaint the figures. The rest of the scenes were completed in the same way, though by more junior artists. The donors were portrayed at the bottom of the composition, and the painters left cartouches for explanatory text to be written by a local scribe.

The other major compositions were similarly painted on the remaining walls, and the Heavenly Kings of the four directions were depicted on the corner segments between each sloping wall. Then Baode had to consider the lower registers and the coffered ceiling. It was common to use stencils or pounces for the latter in order to ensure that the design was repeated uniformly. The outline of the design was drawn in an ink wash on squares of thick, coarse local paper and then pricked through with a needle. Next, the artist would fill a cloth bag with red cinnabar powder, tie it up, and

attach it to the end of a long stick; scaffolding had been erected inside the cave so that the ceiling was accessible. With one hand holding the paper pounce in place on the ceiling, the artist would bang the powder bag against the paper so that, on impact, powder leaked through the rough cloth and the holes in the paper onto the ceiling behind, leaving a faint red outline. This process was continued until the whole ceiling was covered in red lines. For this particular ceiling Baode had ordered an apprentice to prepare a new pounce of a small Buddha figure sitting on a lotus throne (see figure 35), and decorative lotus flower motifs.27 The pattern was composed in tiers: on the outside several rows of the seated Buddha figure, then flying musicians and the lotus, and finally, in the very center of the ceiling, a pair of intertwined dragons. Each artist worked with a different colored paint, tracing around the designs and then filling them in with a few strokes until the whole was complete. The lower registers of the walls were also filled with repeating designs, but there was no need to use pounces for these as they were easily accessible.

FIGURE 35. Pounce and ink on paper with pricked outlines from a design on the other side: Buddha on a lotus throne, from Dunhuang, mid-tenth century. (The British Museum, 1919,0101,0.73.)

The inter-temple monk administrator in charge of the commission visited the site regularly to see how the work was progressing, and other monks and nuns would also come to have a look. One day, newly ordained monks and nuns, distinguished by their pale, freshly shaven heads, paid a visit. Baode showed them the painting of the heretics being tonsured, and they giggled: most were still only children.

While the artists were working on the inside of the cave,

carpenters, sculptors, and stonemasons were brought in. The carpenters erected a wooden awning resembling the tiled roof of a temple over the entrance to the cave. Planks on either side of the entrance emulated columns. The stonemasons worked on the central, U-shaped platform inside the cave, chiseling lotus designs on its two steps. The sculptors measured the platform and then went away to their studio to prepare the central statue grouping. It was usual to have a grouping of three, five, or seven figures with Buddha in the center, flanked by his two disciples, the youth Ānanda and the old man Kāśyapa.28 Additional figures were of bodhisattvas and the Heavenly Kings. The local stone was in short supply and too friable to be used for sculpture; statues were modeled instead from clay stucco on an armature of wood or tamarisk.29 Some of their features, such as hands and feet, were made using molds.30 Once prepared, they were put in position and painted. This cave, because of its size and importance, contained three statue groupings, each with a different manifestation of Buddha in the center. The main grouping, with its back to the curtain wall, faced the cave entrance. Bodhisattvas were painted on the curtain wall, to either side of the Buddha figure. The placing of the statue grouping enabled worshippers to circumambulate the image, and the rear of the curtain wall was also painted with elaborate designs.

The Mogao Caves included a memorial chapel to Hong Bian, once the most important Buddhist in the area west of the Yellow river. He had been especially active in Dunhuang in the late ninth century after the Tibetans were ousted and was awarded the “Honor of Wearing Purple” by the Chinese government.31 After his death in 862, Hong’s memorial chapel was excavated from the side of another cave and his statue commissioned by General Zhang, a great patron of Buddhism. The painted statue, showing the monk sitting cross-legged in a patched robe, was placed on a low, painted

platform. The painting on the wall behind showed his two attendants and, hanging from trees, his leather satchel and water bottle. In Baode's time, the statue was still in situ, but several decades later it was removed so that the small cave could be put to another use. Bundles of manuscripts on paper, printed documents, and silk paintings from the Dunhuang monasteries' libraries were carefully placed in the chamber, and its entrance sealed and painted over.[32] It was not reopened until 1900. The finds included prayers and paintings commissioned by King Cao.

In contrast to the statues, the cave walls and silk paintings contained many portraits of local individuals who had acted as the donors, among them members of wealthy local families, other local dignitaries, and monks and nuns. But the primary donors at the time were Dunhuang's rulers. King Cao was depicted as a young man in a cave commissioned by one of his numerous brothers-in-law (this particular one had married his sixteenth sister). In the same cave, one wall of the corridor leading to the main chamber showed King Cao's father at the head of all his sons, each holding offerings to the Buddha.[33]

Cao Yuanzhong had become ruler shortly after this portrait was finished, following the death of his two elder brothers, who had in turn each ruled for only a few years. Their father had been ruler before this, and Cao Yuanzhong expected his son to succeed him. The Dunhuang court sent regular embassies to the various dynasties that had ruled parts of China since the end of the Tang in 907 and accepted the honors awarded them by successive emperors, but to all intents and purposes they were autonomous. This remained the case even after the Song dynasty reunited China in 960. King Cao had more regular contact with neighboring Tarim kingdoms: Khotan to the west, Kocho to the northwest, and Ganzhou to the east, though less with lands beyond the Pamir.[34] Relations with Khotan were excellent.[35] Embassies

passed back and forth, and Khotan's royal family sometimes visited Dunhuang. They were fervent Buddhists and had even patronized the Mogao Caves, their portraits being painted by an academician on a cave wall in commemoration of their donation. There, the king, his queen, and numerous princes and princesses all appear with elaborate coiffures, much jewelry, and dressed in richly decorated silk robes.36

Kocho and Ganzhou were both ruled by Uygurs, the descendants of those refugee families forced to move south after their defeat by the Kirghiz.37 One group had moved first to Beshbalik, north of the Tianshan, but then had migrated across the mountains to the Turfan basin and settled in Kocho. They continued to use Beshbalik as their summer capital. It lay within the rich pastures of Dzungaria and was cooler than the low-lying Turfan basin. Many of the Uygurs married local people and embraced Buddhism. Kocho also had a Manichaean community, mainly comprising Sogdians who had long served as merchants from their country who passed along the Silk Road in previous centuries. But, in recent decades, their numbers had been swollen by refugees from Sogdia, families who were unwilling to convert to Islam. Both Manichaeans and Buddhists patronized local cave temples near Kocho and commissioned new works in a Uygur style, distinct from the Chinese Central Asian style of earlier caves.38 There was also a Nestorian Christian community, and it too had caves painted with scenes from its religion, one showing worshippers arriving at church on Palm Sunday.39 Buddhist, Manichaean, and Nestorian texts were translated into Uygur from various languages: a Uygur version of *Aesop's Fables* was written in this period.40

Relations with Dunhuang's Uygur neighbors were difficult, despite outward signs of friendship. The kingdom's large Uygur population retained their own clan organizations, and their influence was felt at all levels of society from the court

down. Cao Yuanzhong's mother was the daughter of the Ganzhou Uygur khagan, and his sister married a later khagan.41 King Cao maintained an uneasy peace with them during his reign, but after his death the Uygurs became increasingly influential in Dunhuang.42

This influence was also evident in the art of the period. Baode painted in what was considered a regional Chinese style, based on the metropolitan style that had been perfected in the Tang dynasty, which had itself absorbed Indian and Persian influences. From the height of the Tang in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, the style filtered back along the Silk Road, where it was absorbed into local styles and itself absorbed new styles. In the eighth century, six Chinese artists traveled to Turkic lands to paint a portrait of the dead khagan. His brother was so pleased with the likeness that he sent a gift of fifty horses in return.43 Chinese artists were also requested by the Tibetan court, and a distinct style developed there, influenced initially by Indian, Kashmiri, and Chinese artists and then, from the late tenth century, by Khotanese artists.44

The Dunhuang Painting Academy was the beneficiary of these cross-cultural influences and of the region's unsettled history over the previous century. Tibetan artists had been resident since the Tibetan occupation, and Uygurs since the end of the Uygur kingdom, and in the tenth century these new influences started to be seen in the Mogao Cave paintings, some donors even requesting certain artists and styles. The artists were professional and able to distinguish between the styles, but motifs and some small stylistic features crept across the divides. Earlier styles were reworked as caves were renovated.

The Great Buddha Temple was the largest cave among the hundreds in the complex.45 Its huge statue of Buddha had been erected early in the eighth century, when Dunhuang was under the control of a Chinese dynasty at the height of

its powers, and before the rebellion of Rokshan.46 This Buddha figure was in typical high-Tang Chinese style, molded from clay on a rock core left when the rest of the cave had been excavated. The workmen of the time also excavated a tunnel around the back of the figure, and carpenters built a wooden staircase leading up to the head of the Buddha and a nine-story pagoda jutting out from the cliff face to protect the statue from the elements.

By 966, the cave was in need of repair. It was the end of the fifth month, and King Cao and Lady Zhai were visiting the caves to perform pious acts following a month of fasting.47 Two of the wooden platforms around the colossal Buddha were rotten, and when the king and his wife were approached, they readily agreed to fund the restoration. The work started on the nineteenth day and was completed in less than ten days.48 New timber was obtained from stores in the town—the poplar wood in the valley itself was too dry—and workmen were also hired in Dunhuang, the monastery at the cave temples providing them with food and wine. During this initial work, additional problems were discovered. The cave temple administration approached King Cao again, and he agreed to provide more funds for a second stage of restoration on which fifty-six carpenters and ten plasterers were employed. The end of the work was celebrated with a great banquet.

King Cao and Lady Zhai were not Baode's only patrons. As the phrase had it, "his brush was moistened" by wealthy members of the community at one time or another, as well as by visiting royalty and ambassadors. He was often asked to prepare silk paintings and banners for display at Buddhist services or for use in the numerous festivals that punctuated the year. One of the most profitable of these for Baode was the procession of the Buddha's image.

Dunhuang had adopted this ceremony from Khotan, where

it had been immensely popular since the fifth century.[49] It was held on various days throughout the year, such as Buddha's birthday and the Moon Festival. A large statue of Buddha was placed in a cart and decorated with gold and silver, garlands and banners. The cart was followed by others containing statues of bodhisattvas and the Heavenly Kings. Before the procession started on its journey out of the city to the cave temples, the streets were swept and sprinkled with water, the gates of the city were closed off with vast curtains, and the statues were washed with fragrant water by the monks.

The procession made its way along the dusty track toward the cave temple. The carts were followed by all the monks and nuns, led by the king wearing a new cloak and burning the finest incense in a long-handled gilt incense-holder inlaid with gems. In Khotan, there had been fourteen days of processions attended by all the monks in the region, and each day the statue of a famous local monk was part of the procession. There, each of the twenty (or more) carts carrying the Buddha statue were constructed into five-storied pagodas. In Dunhuang, the celebrations were shorter and less elaborate, but it was still a major event, and everyone who could afford it paid for offerings and decorations. Many of the numerous banners held aloft by the monks and hung from the carts were Baode's work. The banners usually depicted a bodhisattva or a Heavenly King and were made from one strip of silk, which came in standard widths of about twenty-two inches. Once the painting itself was complete, a triangular headpiece of bordered silk was sewn onto the top of the painting with a loop from which to hang it. The base was stiffened with a piece of bamboo or wood. Two long, thin strips of dyed silk were then sewn down each side of the painting, and three or four long strips added at the bottom. Another stiffener was fixed between these and the bottom of the painting itself (see figure 36).[50] Banners on

hemp were commissioned by those who could not afford silk, but Baode did not take these commissions.[51]

Up to three widths of silk were used for the larger paintings, enabling Baode to compose elaborate scenes of Buddhist paradises, with the central Buddha figure on a lotus throne, surrounded by his attendants, and with scenes from Buddha's former lives on the outer register.[52] Baode would make a careful full-size sketch of the whole composition before starting to paint. A space was left at the bottom for donor portraits, but increasingly he was being asked to make the portraits much larger so that they encroached into the main scene itself. Sometimes the donor figures were almost as large as the subject of the painting.

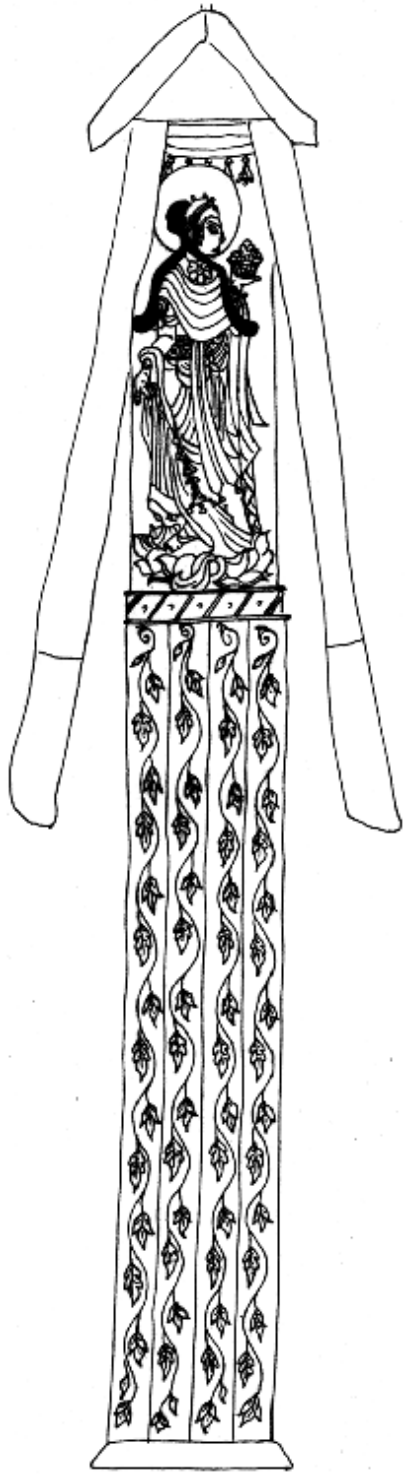

FIGURE 36. Silk and painted banner used in a procession of the Buddha’s image, late ninth century. (The British

Museum, 1919,0101,0.120. Drawing by author.)

Baode's contemporaries in Chang'an, the Song dynasty capital, might have regard Dunhuang as little more than a provincial backwater, forgetting the great heyday of China and her links with the outside world through the trade routes across the Tarim. They owed a debt to the iconographies, techniques, and materials of art and culture brought from afar and filtered through the Tarim. The new Chinese emperor was a keen patron of the arts, and the imperial Painting Academy attracted literati versed in literature and painting, able to draw on the works of past masters and painting manuals held in the imperial collections, certain of the moral and artistic superiority of their works over all others.53 Their names are known, but most of their works have been lost. The works of Dong Baode and his contemporaries in the Tarim, however, though their names have long been forgotten, are still admired today.

Epilogue

It is whimsical enough that the orders of a Mogul Khan, who reigned on the borders of China, should have lowered the price of herrings in the English market.

EDWARD GIBBON, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, 1776-88*

THE SILK ROAD DID NOT END with Dong Baode in the tenth century. Indeed, some argue that it continues to the present day.1 This coda has therefore been added to provide no more than a snapshot and a guide to further reading on some of the main themes addressed in the book for the period following these tales, from about AD 1000 to 1400—although most of the examples below are from the thirteenth century. Over these centuries, many new powers rose and declined. Some of them are almost forgotten to history, like Khotan and the other Tarim kingdoms discussed in these tales. Although they are mentioned in historical sources, their archaeological remains—often including manuscripts in their own long-forgotten languages—reveal much more of their story. For example, for two centuries the Tanguts ruled an empire from Dunhuang to the Mongolian border before their final defeat by Genghis Khan in 1227 (which also saw the death of the Mongol leader).2 More than 10,000 manuscripts and early printed documents from a single find in a Buddhist stupa at the Tangut border city of Karakhoto have yet to be fully cataloged or studied, and more recent archaeological explorations around their capital and imperial tombs near

Yinchuan continue to provide rich new materials.[3]

Other cultures had a more obvious and lasting influence, notably the Turkic and Mongolian empires that spread from the borders of China and the Tarim basin into India and across Eurasia.[4] The Turkic Karakhanids—recent converts to Islam—took Khotan in 1006.[5] The Cuman-Kipchak confederation and Seljuk Turks expanded into western Asia to the borders of Europe, the former in the steppe and the latter through Iran to Anatolia.[6] Turks also established the Delhi sultanate in northern India.[7] The Mongols followed this westward expansion from the steppe, creating an unparalleled Eurasian empire.[8] With the Mongol rise in the thirteenth century, trade and travel across Eurasia flourished, continuing to link with North and East African by land and sea, and with Europe by sea, river, and land.[9]

Silk remained prized, and both raw and finished silk were increasingly produced in multiple centers throughout Eurasia: the Chinese monopoly had long disappeared, though they continued to export raw and finished silk. The Mongols required prodigious supplies and established new production centers in the Tarim.[10] Italy increasingly controlled the silk trade to Europe by land through the steppe and by sea, much of it through the Black Sea and Crimea hub.[11] The relative ease of travel across the Mongolian empire has also been held responsible for the spread of the plague virus across Eurasia and the death of millions.[12]

The Mongols had their own traditional religion but also showed a certain tolerance of others as it suited them.[13] However, this period was notable for the further expansion of Islam, spread this time not by the conquests of the Arabs but by the conversion and conquests of the Turks, thus continuing the diffusion and advances in science, technology, economy, art, and literature.[14] Although the Tarim became largely Islamic by the fourteenth century, religious diversity remained—Marco Polo, for example, reports communities of

Nestorian Christians in Kashgar and Yarkand.[15] Buddhism continued on the Tibetan plateau, having been adopted by the Mongol Ilkanids briefly in the thirteenth century, before they too converted to Islam.[16] However, Buddhism survived mainly on the eastern edges of the Silk Road—southeast Asia, China, Japan, and Korea—and continued its decline in its birthplace on the Indian subcontinent.[17] That is where a Zoroastrian community, the Parsi, found a new homeland after fleeing persecution in Persia.[18] They joined the Hindu, Jains, and Muslims. Arab traders had brought Islam to the coastal cities of India by the start of these tales in the eighth century, and the Turks brought it into the north at their end in the tenth century.[19] Christianity dominated on the European edge of this world and, until the Ottoman conquest, in Constantinople. Axum has also retained its Christian faith to the present day, but Islam was dominant among the Swahili peoples trading along Africa's eastern coast.[20]

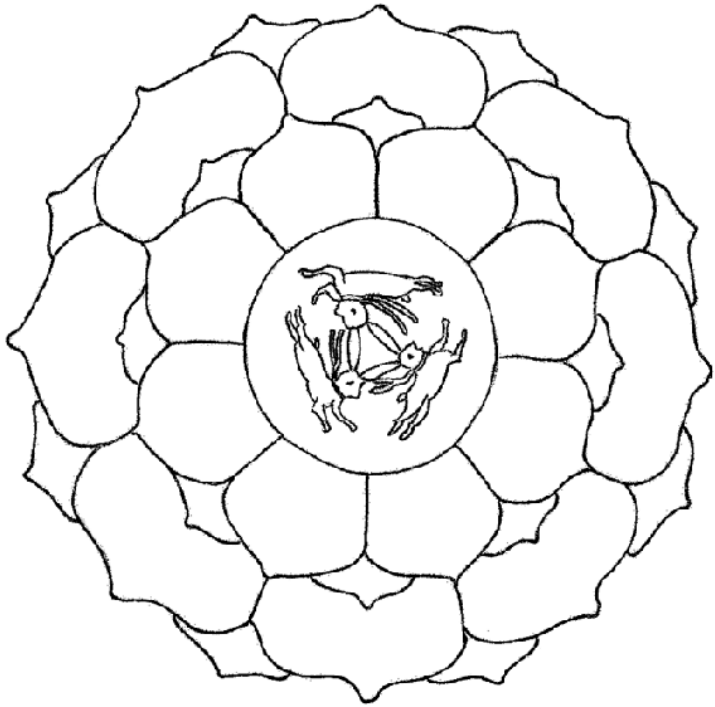

FIGURE 37. The three-rabbit design inside a lotus on the apex of the ceiling of Dunhuang Mogao Cave 407, late sixth century. (Drawing by author.)

Several travelers left accounts of their journeys to and from the Mongol court, journeys prompted by diplomacy, trade, and faith, just like the earlier travelers in these tales. Among them were the Franciscans John of Plano Carpini (1182–1252) and William of Rubruck (ca. 1220–ca. 1293), the merchant Marco Polo (1254–1324), and the pilgrim Ibn Battuta (1304–1368/9).21 Rabban Sauma (ca. 1220–1294), a Nestorian Christian at the Mongol court, traveled to Europe.22 One of the most detailed chroniclers of the time was the Persian historian Rashīd al-Dīn (1247–1318).23 Of course, numerous soldiers, merchants, nuns, monks, princesses, and others lived on and traveled these routes, but they left at most faint traces of their lives.

The modes of land transport did not change significantly over this period. The fastest travel was still by relays of

horses, exemplified by steppe warriors millennia previously, while camels, yaks, carts, the donkey, and foot were favored for different terrains and different levels of wealth. The modern growth of maritime archaeology, with its recent spectacular discoveries, has shown evidence of ongoing Indian Ocean sea trade into the second millennium—and also its risks, with the loss of boats laden with rich cargoes. The invention of porcelain in China in the last quarter of the first millennium led to a demand across Eurasia that equaled that for silk, and, like silk, it was to be many centuries before the technology, the means of production, also spread.[24] Great loads of ceramics—but rarely the prized porcelains—were transported by Arab, Chinese, and southeast Asian boats reaching as far as the coast of Africa.[25]

As before, however, numerous other goods were traded: by the thirteenth century, there were markets in the Mediterranean for Central Asian slaves,[26] in Iran for Chinese rhubarb and tea,[27] and in China for African and Indian ivory. Under Mongol rule, the Chinese enjoyed Iranian sherbet and "Muslim dumpling soup," the latter made from mutton broth, Mongolian cheese, and peas from West Asia;[28] the elite from Delhi to London wore gold brocaded Mongol-style clothes;[29] and the Ilkanids in Iran introduced block-printed paper money based on Chinese examples.[30]

Some of the tales of the Buddha's former life—the *jātaka*—that adorned the cave temple walls along the eastern Silk Road found their way into new editions of *Aesop's Fables*.[31] And a design of three rabbits originally found on the apex of ceilings of sixth- and seventh-century Buddhist caves at Dunhuang decorated twelfth-century Iranian metalwork and appeared on Ilkanid coins minted in 1281 or 1282.[32] By the thirteenth century, the three-rabbit motif had spread to Christian Europe, where it became common in churches and, later, was also found in synagogues. As one modern scholar has remarked, the "Mongolian empire functioned . . . as the

principal cultural clearing house for the Old World for well over a century."[33]

Even those people on the fringes of society saw themselves as part of a connected world. The thirteenth-century English chronicler Matthew Paris noted that Emperor Frederick II's (1194–1250) merchants sailed to India. He also believed that the 1238 invasion of Russia by the Mongols had affected the English herring market. The invasion had threatened the commerce of Novgorod in the Baltic and North seas and thus deterred their merchants from traveling to England to buy fish. This left a glut, which forced the sellers to lower their price.[34] Centuries later, this bemused the eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon, but it was not an isolated example. Afro-Eurasia remained a connected world where the lives of ordinary people were touched, even if in small ways, by the culture, technologies, and goods from distant lands.

PLATE 1. Remnants of a gaiter showing a battle scene, possibly between the Sasanian king Khusro I and the Axumites in 580. (Lyon, Musee des Tissus MT 28828, c Lyon, MTMAD, Pierre Verrier.)

PLATE 2. Illustrated Manichaean manuscript written in Uygur in Sogdian script from Kocho, tenth century. (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum fur Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by I. Papadopoulus, III 6368a.)

PLATE 3. Sogdian silver dish with battle scene deriving from the Seige of Jericho as told in the Book of Joshua in the Bible, ninth–tenth century. (The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Inv. No. S-46. Photograph c The State Hermitage Museum. Photo by Leonard Kheifets.)

PLATE 4. Mural showing battle scene from the Buddhist story “The Five Hundred Robbers,” depicting cavalry in chain mail facing infantry with various weapons, Dunhuang

Mogao Cave 285, sixth century. (Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy.)

PLATE 5. Uygur prince, possibly a posthumous memorial portrait, on a ramie banner discovered near Kocho,

tenth century. (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Photograph by I. Papadopoulus, III 4524.)

PLATE 6. Detail from a Buddhist paradise scene showing a dancer possibly performing the Sogdian whirling dance accompanied by an orchestra, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 112, seventh century. (Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy.)

PLATE 7. Female novices being tonsured after their defeat in the contest with the Buddhist monk Śāriputra, Dunhuang Mogao Cave 445, eighth century. (Courtesy of the Dunhuang Academy.)

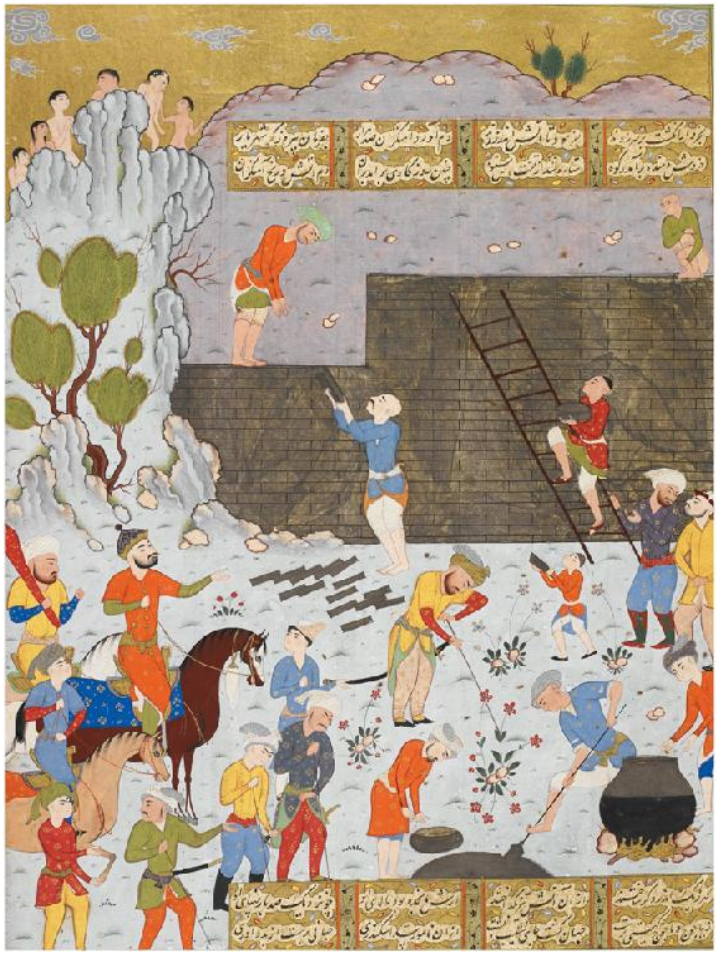

PLATE 8. Alexander the Great building the wall against Gog and Magog, from a manuscript of the *Shāhnāmah* by Firdawsi, sixteenth century. (IO Islamic 3540, f.390R., the British Library Board.)

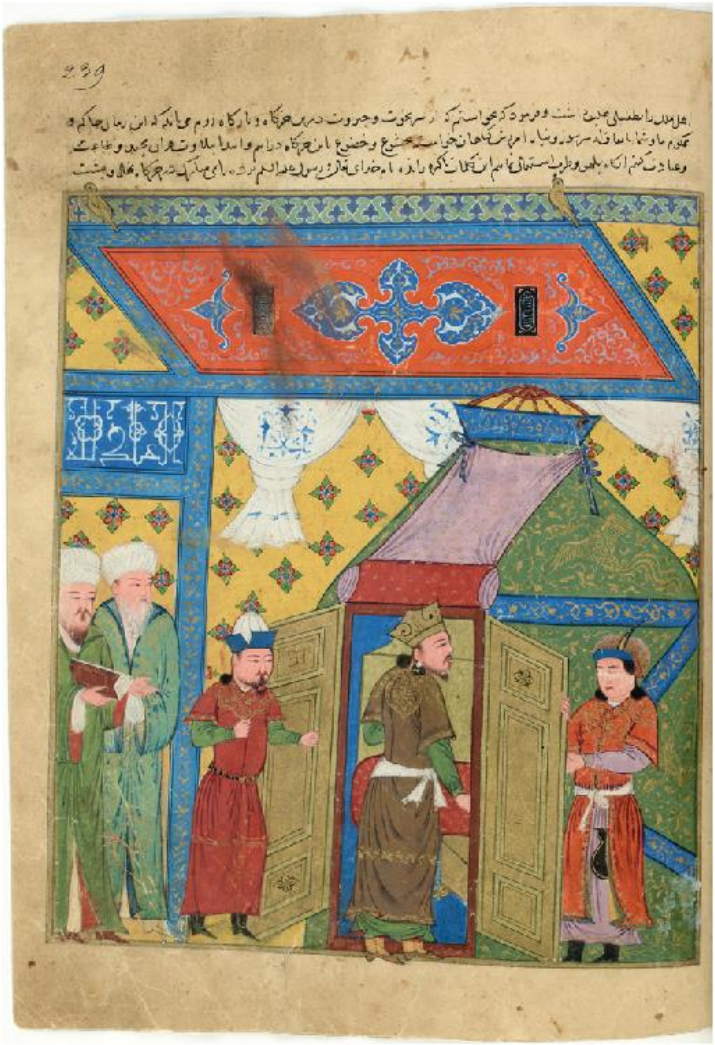

PLATE 9. The conversion of the Mongol Ilkanid khagan, Mahmud Ghazan (r. 1295–1304), to Islam, from Rashīd al-Dīn's manuscript *Jāmi al-tawārīkh*, early fourteenth century. (Supplement person 1113, courtesy of Bibliotheque nationale de France.)

PLATE 10. The Hariri Ship, showing the corded planks of African and Arab boats, from a manuscript of Al-Hariri's *Maqamat,* by the scribe from Wasit, 1237. (Ms. arabe 5847, f.119V., courtesy of Bibliotheque nationale de France.)

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. See Chin 2013.

2. See Olson 2013.

3. Chin 2013 also discusses the adoption of the term by Sven Hedin and the start of its wider usage from the 1930s (see the table of usage in Chin's fig. 1). See also Waugh 2007b, Waugh 2007c. In 1995, when I first proposed this book, the publishers were skeptical of the title, arguing that "The Silk Road" was too obscure to attract readers. In fact, the term started coming into general usage in Europe and the United States in the late 1980s, as I showed in a previous discussion (Whitfield 2007), but was still relatively niche at the time. As a crude illustration of this, consider that Worldcat contains almost 2,000 book titles containing "medieval" in 1995 and only 40 containing "The Silk Road(s)."

4. Millward 2013, 3. Jonathan Bloom (2005) has argued for "Paper Road" on the grounds of its influence; see n. 16 below.

5. I have no problem with the term "road" or "roads," taking them in a broad sense to mean marked routes along which people and goods travel. But we have also to take into account routes across the steppe, which might not follow any single route, and routes across the sea.

6. Dichotomies simplify our view of a complex world and are therefore always seductive, if inevitably misleading and distorting. See Lieberman 1997; Whitfield 2008. Chin discusses how Hedin stated this dichotomy in his vision of a new Silk Road: "It should unite two oceans, the Pacific and the Atlantic; two continents; two races, the yellow and the white; two

cultures, the Chinese and the Western" (2013, 217, quoting Hedin 1938, 223, 233, 234).

7. See "Prologue: The Shipmaster's Tale" and "The Writer's Tale" for the East African and northern European connections, respectively.

8. See Chin 2013; Waugh 2007a. "The father of the narrow 'silk road' conception was also interested in the general phenomenon of trans-Eurasian exchanges now encompassed by the shorthand we know as the silk road" (Millward 2013, 5). Chin shows how Richthofen used Chinese sources to reassess the routes of the Greeks, of Ptolemy and Marinus.

9. In Warwick Ball's words, it has "become both a band wagon and a gravy train" (2007, 80). Hugh Pope (2005) called it "a romantic deception." See also Rezakhani 2010; Raschke 1978.

10. With the ongoing UNESCO Silk Route bid, it is possible that much of the archaeological legacy of western China and Central Asia will be labeled as "Silk Road/Route" for the foreseeable future. See n. 15 below.

11. A key Buddhist parable used to illustrate this is that of the burning house, told in the Lotus Sutra, whereby a father lies to his children about the wonderful toys awaiting them outside in order to get them out of a burning house and thus save their lives. See Watson 1993, 56–57.

12. Reuter 1998. For examples in popular culture, see http://www.medievaltimes.com/ and http://www.zazzle.co.uk/medieval+gifts.

13. The scope and applicability of "the Global Middle Ages" was addressed by two collaborative projects in 2011–13: http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/research/project/defining-the-global-middle-ages.html and http://www.laits.utexas.edu/gma/portal/.

14. Pelham Gore of Lancaster University frames the issue elegantly: "The name 'Silk Road' may be useful, however, to enable us to simplify the whole extremely complicated process to a level where it is manageable. It enables us to focus on a finite set of topics and issues, rather than becoming lost in an infinite intellectual mist. Perhaps scholars in a few centuries will refer to the trans-Pacific 'Silicon (sea) Lane': we may not see it like that now but it might simplify their thinking about the global movements of now important commodities and the economic and power shift s that go with them" (private communication).

15. See http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/5335/ for the Chinese list of sites to be included and Williams 2013 (http://idp.bl.uk/conference/index.html) for a discussion of the challenges involved in mapping the "Silk Road" for the bid.

16. In his argument for "the Paper Route," Bloom (2005) seems to be taking the line that it is not volume of trade/exchange of a commodity that is key but the influence on the societies it reached of that commodity. However, even if we were to accept this line, assessing influence is very

complex and needs to be measured in terms of such factors as the wealth brought into societies by trade and the ideas that come along with it, such as Buddhism. The study of the movement of paper technology and its trade across Eurasia is certainly interesting but comes within the broader remit of "Silk Road studies."

17. Some scholars have pushed at these boundaries, including James Millward (2013). For a summary of the silk trade in China and Central Asia, see Rossabi 1997.

18. There is evidence of cross-Eurasian trade before this—including in silk and jade. "By the end of the Bronze age, if not before, Central Asia was in touch with all four homelands" (Adshead 1993, 32). For the early sea trade, see Begley and de Puma 1992. The difference with the time of the "Silk Road" is one of quantity and sustainability.

19. "The sites of Central Asia had for centuries relied for their prosperity on irrigation agriculture. . . . This alone easily explains the wealth and prosperity of this region without assuming an economy based on trade" (Rashcke 1976, 699–700).

Valerie Hansen also argues against the importance of private trade in this region, arguing instead for prosperity through the Chinese military presence (2013, 82). For further discussion of trade in the Tarim, see Whitfield 2015.

20. Those traveling the farthest distances were probably diplomatic envoys, and they also had a role in transferring silk and other commodities. In my epilogue, I briefly discuss the longer land and sea journeys made by traders in the Mongol period, such as Marco Polo. I also discuss a Chinese prisoner-of-war who traveled to Baghdad and on to Africa.

21. In "The Shipmaster's Tale" and "The Writer's Tale," I discuss the possibility of sea merchants traveling from China to Africa and cite a story of a merchant who went from Oman to China and back.

22. We should continue to challenge such simplifications but should not need to do this within the scholarly community. There was, of course, interaction among merchants separated by great distance by the maritime trade, such as African merchants in Sri Lanka or Arabian Jewish merchants in China.

23. Trade in all these commodities is an important part of Afro-Eurasian connections, and, in most cases, the development of the Silk Road opened new and more distant markets for these goods.

24. See n. 6 above.

25. See Gunder Frank 1992a for a polemic approach to the importance of Central Asia. The debate was continued in the journal *Studies in*

History (see Gunder Frank 1992b for reference). Adshead 1993 also addresses the role of Central Asia in the framework of the historiography of the Indo-European debate, Zoroastrianism, and Nestorian Christianity. For the centrality of Central Asia in the Silk Road story, see de la Vaissière 2005.

26. "Who would like to leave the flesh pots and go forth into the wilderness? There are no volunteers for the Outer Darkness. To be a barbarian is a moral as well as an economic and political state. The history of Central Eurasia is a history of the barbarian" (Sinor 1977, I: 94–95).

27. For example, see E. H. Warmington's 1928 study of the trade between Rome and India.

28. See "Prologue: The Shipmaster's Tale" for references to Africa and Indian Ocean networks as well as to recent maritime finds. See "The Writer's Tale" and the epilogue for more references on Chinese and southeast Asian maritime trade.

29. See "Prologue: The Shipmaster's Tale."

30. For discussions of imperial archaeology, see Trümpler et al. 2008; Jacobs 2010; Jacobs 2014.

31. However, several recent short historical introductions have covered Eurasia (Liu 2010; Golden 2011). I would recommend Millward (2013), who succeeds because he does not attempt a history but takes a very broad thematic approach. Yet he does stray into a broader definition of the "Silk Road" than argued here. Works taking an archaeological/geographical survey of the major land routes, such as Tucker 2003, are also useful as introductions.

32. Stein 1921, viii.

33. See Galambos and van Schaik 2012, 24, for a summary of reasons suggested by scholars for its sealing and for their own conclusions.

34. Rong 2002.

35. Whitfield 2002.

36. There is much excellent scholarship but also notable lacunae because of this approach—for example, in considering the stemma of Buddhist texts that require consideration of Tibetan, Uygur, Khotanese, Sanskrit, Gandhārī, and other editions, or in studying the art without looking at examples in India and Gandhāra.

37. Beckwith 1987, 192.

38. Dunlop 1967; Fischel 1965; Cansdale 1998.

39. On Manichaeism, see Lieu 1985; Lieu 1992. On Zoroastrianism, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004; Stewart 2013.

40. Foltz 1999, 61–88.

1. Translation in Hourani 1995, 3.

2. We have few records of names in the Axumite kingdom other than those of kings. I have therefore used a king's name for this character. Tazena was the name of the father of Kaleb, the king during the period discussed here. This is not meant to imply any link with the royal family. Tazena is a fictional character, but the events described are historically factual.

3. Hourani 1995, 92–95, quotes several sources for this. The hypothesis about the ship planks being more flexible for surviving reefs is one discussed by Hourani; he considers various other theses, too, the most plausible of which he believes to be the conservative nature of the seaman, using an old method, and the comparative expense of iron for nailing the ships together (1995, 95–97). For John Carswell's update on the debate on the nature of the ships' hulls, see his notes in Hourani (150–52).

4. For a discussion of the Indian Ocean and monsoon winds, see Pearson 2003, 19–24. As he points out, the nature of monsoons have been known by communities on the Indian Ocean since the Bronze Age (51). The consensus now seems to be that nailed ships could negotiate the ocean and that they continued in use because of local tradition, skills, and availability of materials.

5. Barbarikon is mentioned by the first-century Greek navigation manual *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea:* "This river [the Indus] has seven mouths, very shallow and marshy, so that they are not navigable, except the one in the middle; at which by the shore, is the market-town, Barbaricum" (http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/periplus/periplus.html paragraph 38). For a translation, see also Casson 1989. For early Indian Ocean trade, see Beaujard 2012; Begley and de Puma 1992; Mehaud 1980.

6. For Roman glass found in Begram from Kushan times, see Hackin 1939; Hackin 1954.

7. Large numbers of Axumite coins have been found in India (Henze 2000, 31). See also n. 14 below.

8. For the Sogdians and India, see de la Vaissière 2005, 83–89.

9. For Sogdian inscriptions in the upper Indus valley, see Sims-Williams 1989; Sims-Williams 1996, 52–56. For inscriptions in other languages, see Jettmar 1989; Neelis 1997; Ma 1989; Höllmann 1993.

10. S. I. Berzina (1984) suggests that coins were detained en route from Adulis to Axum, possibly being carried by a Kushan embassy to Axum, but there is no corroborating evidence for this or any other evidence for how they arrived.

11. The monastery was probably founded in the sixth century (see Phillipson 2002, 128–31; Matthews and Mordini 1959), although, as Berzina (1984) points out, probably on the site of an existing shrine. Of course, it is possible that the coins were not in this place at this time and only moved there later. Berzina argues that the box was Indian-made. For a similar box of Indian workmanship found in Ethiopia, see Chittick 1974, 199, fig. 23a.

12. The Buddhists traveled from India with many merchant cargos, spreading their faith throughout southeast and east Asia. See Liu 1996 and Neelis 2010 for discussions of the symbiotic relationship between Buddhism and trade. However, there is no evidence—so far as I know—of Buddhism reaching Africa, though it is possible.

13. For the Christianization of Axum, see Fowden 1993, 109–16; Phillipson 1998, 112; Henze 2000, 32–34.

14. For Axumite coinage, see Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995; Munro-Hay 1999. For Axum coins found in India and Sri Lanka as well as imitations, see Kristhnamurthy 1999; Nawartmal 1999; West 2004.

15. As Stuart Munro-Hay points out (1991, 185), the disk and crescent could also be a representation of the sun and moon. Given the importance of Mahrem to the royal myth, this is a possible interpretation. Sun and moon symbolism appears in most religions, including Manicheanism (Klimkeit 1983, 11).

16. For the cathedral, see Phillipson 1998, 114–16. Remains of two churches have been found to date at Adulis, with basilicas and lateral square chambers off the apse, similar to contemporary churches in Syria and Palestine. However, we know little about their decoration and so this is hypothetical, based on what we know of the decoration of Orthodox Christian churches elsewhere. Paul Henze (2000, 34–37) discusses Axum architecture and notes the report by one of the Prophet Muhammed's later wives in the 620s—following her return from exile in Axum—that the cathedral walls were covered in paintings.

17. Yūsuf As'ar Yath'ar was also known as Yūsuf Dhū Nuwās. The details and dating of this are uncertain, but contemporary accounts suggest he moved against Christian communities at Zafar and Najrān (in present-day Yemen and the Saudi Arabian/Yemen border). See Bowersock 2013 for an account of this conflict. Henze 2000, 40–41, also gives a summary, and see Pickworth 2003 for Yemen on the Silk Road; see Yule 2007 for Christian remains in Yemen. The retaliation by King Kaleb is recorded by the Byzantine historian Procopius, who says he had the support of Justinian I and that Kaleb won the battle and set up a new Christian ruler. One of the main sources for this is a contemporary Syriac letter by Simeon of Beth Arsham (d. 540), but doubt has been expressed

over the authenticity of this. Munro-Hay (1991, 88) suggests that this campaign led to a weakening of Axumite power.

18. Roberta Tomber (2008, 170) reviews scholarship suggesting that this campaign was part of a larger power struggle between the Persian and the Byzantine empires and that the ships were manned not only by Axumites but also by Romans and Persians.

19. This was suggested by Munro-Hay (1991, 183) to account for the larger number of gold issues under King Kaleb.

20. The inscription is known as the *Monumentum Adulitanum.* The original is now lost, but the monk's copy was recorded in his book *Christian Topography*. For a translation, see Wolska-Conus 1968, 372–78. The Ge'ez language was inscribed using both the epigraphic South Arabian script and the newly developed Axumite script, also called Ge'ez. See Henze 2000, 37–39; Munro-Hay 1991, 215; Bowersock 2013, 8–21.

21. Translation in Munro-Hay 1991, 229.

22. Ibid., 229.

23. Henze 2000, 37.

24. The oldest surviving gospels known are Ethiopian, the Gatima Gospels, kept in Abba Garima Monastery. They date from the fourth to the seventh centuries and are on parchment. See Bailey 2010.

25. For the result of recent excavations at Adulis, see Peacock and Blue 2007. See also Sundström 1907 and Paribeni 1907 for early excavations.

26. For a summary of sources for these goods, see Munro-Hay 1991, 173–74.

27. On Red Sea trade, see Seland 2012. There is also some evidence that the Axumites had their own glass-making industry; see Kaczmarczyk 1989; Morrison 1989.

28. Munro-Hay 1991, 238–39; Morrison 1989, 208.

29. Quoted in Henze 2000, 22.

30. Taprobane is the Greek name for Sri Lanka. Cosmas Indicopleustes (1897, Book XI) records seeing Axumites in Taprobane. A recent shipwreck discovered at the port of Godawaya in southeast Sri Lanka has been tentatively dated from the second century BC to the fourth century AD (Gaur et al. 2011, 9). For trade between Sri Lanka and Central Asia, see Bopearachchi 1997/8.

31. However, the merchant ships were not necessarily Chinese vessels. The monk Yijing left China in a Persian ship. For Mantai, see Carswell 1992.

32. Procopius 1914, 192–95. The Persians controlled both land and sea routes from Byzantium eastward. See also Phillipson 2009, 355.

33. Procopius, quoted in Hourani 1995, 43. See also Norwich 1988,

266, and, for smuggled silk, Hung 2011.

34. Cosmas Indicopleustes (1897, Book II, pp. 45–46).

35. Pearson 2003, 29.

36. Quoted in Pearson 2003, 29.

37. As the increasing numbers of wrecks found by maritime archaeologists is proving.

38. Silk production started in Xinjiang in the second to third centuries (Zhao 2004, 70). For Byzantine silk, see Oikonomidès 1986. The two monks are said to have traveled to China from India and observed silk production, and to have traveled back with the cocoons across the Caspian and Black Sea. If they did travel this route, presumably to avoid the Persians, they would have passed silk-producing communities in Central Asia and could have acquired cocoons there. M. G. Raschke (1978, 622–23) challenges the idea of a Chinese monopoly on silk production. Certainly, by this time, they could not control the production of silk yarns, though the attempts in Central Asia to replicate the Chinese *jin* weave (the tacquete weave, see Zhao 2004, 69–72) suggest that the information was not available; whether this was due to Central Asian weavers being blocked from acquiring the knowledge, or simply that they had not yet acquired it, is not clear.

39. The Byzantine historian Menander Protector reports an actual case, within the period 568–75, of how the Sogdians used their diplomatic influence with the Turks to open up new markets. After failing with the Sasanians, the Sogdian merchants persuaded the khagan to get in touch with Byzantium in order to export the thousands of silk rolls that China paid as tribute to the Turks (Blockley 1985, 111–15). In addition to silk and other textiles (Shepherd and Henning 1959), the Sogdians traded Sasanian and Central Asian silverware, pieces of which have been uncovered in the Urals (de la Vaissière 2000, 368–69). See “The Merchant’s Tale” for more on the Sogdian trade network.

40. An oft-quoted third-century Chinese source (Wan Chen, 南州異物志 *Nanzhou Yiwu zhou*) describes ships with four obliquely set sails and capable of carrying 700 people and 260 tons of cargo, but this might be describing non-Chinese ships. See the discussion in Hourani 1995, 46–50, and descriptions in http://maritimeasia.ws/topic/shiptypes.html.

41. Hourani (1995) also discusses the evidence for Chinese ships in East Africa and discounts it as improbable until the fourteenth century. However, as Carswell points out in the notes to the expanded edition (ibid., 140), more recent archaeological evidence points to contact no later than AD 800. See also McLaughlin 2009. Sergew Hable Selassie (1972, 84–85) reports that Chinese ships came as far as the Red Sea

earlier than this. The Chinese Han histories note a country called *Huangqi*, which in Herrmann 1913 was equated with the Axum coast.

42. For evidence of Roman glass in Axum, see Morrison 1989. It is also probable, as David Phillipson (1998, 67) points out, that the Axumites had their own glass industry. The Chinese valued imported glass, as shown by the existence of fine Greek and Roman pieces in elite tombs. See Whitfield 2010, cat. 48.

43. It is probable that Du Huan, a Chinese captured by the Arabs in the 751 Battle of Talas, also went to Axum. See Smidt 2001. For Chinese and their knowledge of ivory, see Laufer 1925.

44. The Chinese Buddhist monk Faxian had attended the tooth festival and returned to China from Sri Lanka in 413 on a large merchant ship carrying 200 people, changing to another ship of a similar size at a Javan or Sumatran port, after a stopover of five months (Beal 1884, lxxx–lxxxii; Legge 1886, 104–7, 111–15). In 426, a group of Sri Lankan nuns arrived at the port of Guangzhou, given passage by a mariner called Nandi. He returned with a second group in 429 (http://www.maldivesculture.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=207&Itemid=42).
Chinese monks continued to travel by sea between China and Sri Lanka/India. See Lahiri 1986, 33, 41, 51, 95, 111, for accounts of monks in the Chinese Tang period (618–907) who visited Sri Lanka and worshipped the tooth relic.

45. The Chinese monk Faxian suggests 60,000. For Faxian in Sri Lanka, see Legge 1886, 101–7.

46. The festival continues today (Esala Perahera) and is held in August. Faxian's account mentions the festival as starting in the middle of the third month of the lunar calendar. This description is taken from his account (Legge 1886, 105–7). The northwest monsoon starts around November.

47. Munro-Hay 1991, 219–20.

CHAPTER 1. THE MERCHANT'S TALE

1. Translation adapted from Beal 1994, Book 1: 32. I owe thanks to Etienne de la Vaissière for comments on and suggestions for this chapter.

2. The name Nanaivandak occurs in the fourth-century Sogdian Letter II (see Juliano and Lerner 2001, cat. 8, with translation by Nicholas Sims-Williams) and also in the inscriptions in the Indus valley (see n. 32 below). This chapter is not based on a single known historical figure, however, but creates a composite character using information mainly from primary source material.

3. Most Sogdian merchants did not travel such long distances. De la Vaissière (2005, 165) suggests a circuit of hundreds of kilometers between three or four towns, but he also points out a number of instances of much longer travel for trading, including Nanaivandak of the Sogdian letter (165–66), though this is earlier. Evidence of an eighth-century Samarkand merchant who traveled to Kocho is found in a document found at Turfan (60TAM35, 21, cited in Skaff 2003, 505). For travel permits for merchants from "the west" planning to go to Chang'an, see Skaff 2003, 507.

4. See Marshak and Negmatov 1996.

5. The following description of the city is taken from the archaeological reports of Boris Marshak. For images, a summary, and bibliography, see Marshak 2001; Marshak 2002.

6. Sogdian dress is seen, for example, in the murals at Panjikant and Afraisyab. See also Marshak 2001; Yatsenko 2003.

7. For Sogdian communities in the Tarim and Hexi corridor towns, see Rong and Zhang 2004; Rong 2006; Rong 2009; Skaff 2003; Luo 1996; Grenet and Sims-Williams 1987.

8. Sal ammoniac was used as a flux for soldering and as a medicine (Schafer 1963, 218). Goods traded by Sogdians are known from documents found in Turfan; see Rong 2006, 149–50. Sogdian Ancient Letter II from north of Dunhuang mentions trade in musk (Juliano and Lerner 2001, cat. 8; see also King 2007, 130–32). A Dunhuang manuscript in the British Library (Or.8210/S.4398) records the dispatch of five kilograms of sal ammoniac from King Cao of Dunhuang (see "The Artist's Tale") to the Chinese emperor. Manuscripts referred to in the notes, such as Or.8210/S.4398 (in the British Library) or Pelliot chinois 5623 (in Le Bibliothèque nationale de France) can also be viewed online, adding the manuscript number to the end of the following URL: http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_loader.a4d/pm=.

9. See Rong 2006, 152, for Rokshan's collection of silverware. The

camel ewer is a piece in the Hermitage, though there is nothing to link it with Rokshan. See http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/museums/shm/shmeiranca.html.

10. The clash between Arabs and Chinese was the Battle of Talas in 751. For Arab incursions into Central Asia and Kashgar in the early eighth century, see Gibb 1922; Gibb 1923.

11. Both these skills had probably reached the caliphate by this time; both were known in the Tarim. See Bloom 2001 and "The Writer's Tale."

12. The lazurite mines at Badakhstan in present-day northeast Afghanistan have been mined for over 6,000 years and were the main source of lapis in the region and throughout pre-modern Eurasia. The Tibetans were known for their metal-working skills. See Schafer 1963, 254; Heller 2006a.

13. Thilo 1996 gives a full description of Chang'an.

14. Remains of noodles have been discovered in a 4,000-year-old site in Gansu Province, near Lanzhou.

15. See Kieschnick 2003, 222–49.

16. Van Gulik 2003, 178. See also Schafer 1963 on the wineshops of Chang'an (21) and for a three-day drinking holiday (144); see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004 for a contemporary letter apologizing for drunkenness (237–39).

17. Schafer 1963, 55; van Gulik 2003, 186.

18. Chach is present-day Tashkent.

19. For an overview of Manichaeism on the Silk Road, see Foltz 1999. For more details, see Lieu 1985; Lieu 1998; Tremblay 2001.

20. On the religions of the Sogdians, see Grenet 2007.

21. Amoghavajra (Chinese 不空) is a known historical figure. It is possible he was born in Sri Lanka but then moved to Samarkand. He left there for China in 715 at age ten after his father's death. He later visited Sri Lanka (see "The Shipmaster's Tale") and, on his return to China, served with the famous general Geshu Han (see "The Soldier's Tale"). For Amoghavajra's influence on Chinese Buddhism, see Lehnert 2007, 261–66.

22. For the Arab invasion of Sogdia, see de la Vaissière 2005, 263–73.

23. For a very brief account of the Türgesh, see Sinor and Klyashtorny 1996, 344–47.

24. Skaff 2012, 38, citing Chinese sources.

25. For the relations between Türgesh khagan in the 730s and the Chinese, see Skaff 2012, 181–84; Barfield 1992, 131–49.

26. See "The Writer's Tale."

27. Shaban 1970, 58–61.

28. See Grenet and de la Vaissière 2002.

29. See the British Library manuscript Or.8212/81 for an early fragment of the text Rustam, reproduced in Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 3, online at http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_loader.a4d?pm=Or.8212/81.

30. Azarpay 1976; Grenet and Marshak 1998; Compareti 2009.

31. Stewart 2013.

32. For Sogdian inscriptions in the upper Indus valley, see Sims-Williams 1989; Sims-Williams 1996, 52–56; de la Vaissière 2005, 82–89. For inscriptions in other languages, see Jettmar 1989; Neelis 1997; Ma 1989; Höllmann 1993.

33. Sims-Williams 1989, 23. For Tashkurgan, see "The Pilgrim's Tale."

34. De la Vaissière 2005, 368–69. For Byzantine silk smuggling, see Hunt 2011.

35. Schafer 1963, 254 n42.

36. For a Sogdian contract for a female slave, see Yoshida and Moriyasu 1988; Li 2003, cat 48. For other slave contracts and the cost, see Hansen 1995, 41–42; Wong 2004, 70.

37. Bosworth 2005. See also http://www.kroraina.com/ca/h_ustrushana.html. For a contemporary account, see Beal 1884, 1: 31–32.

38. For a contemporary description, see Beal 1884, 1: 30.

39. This was the route taken by the Byzantine historian Menander Protector in the sixth century. See Blockley 1985.

40. Lubo-Lesnichenko 2002; Semenov 2008. The city was reoccupied by the Chinese military governor of Kucha on the death of Suluk khagan in 738.

41. "Karakul" are now better known by their Russian name, *astrakhan*. In more recent times, the skins are taken from fetal lambs, killing the ewe as well. I have not found a source for this in the eighth century. Fat-tailed sheep are also known as *dumba*.

42. For a summary of contemporary descriptions of the decorations of tents of Turkic khagans over this period, see Skaff 2012, 150–53. See also Beal 1888, 42–43.

43. Contemporary sources showing images of the Turks are found, among other places, at Afraysiab (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 111). There are also contemporary accounts by Tamīm ibn Baḥr, a Muslim envoy (see Minorsky 1948).

44. For the cost of camels, see Wong 2004, 102.

45. Beal 1884, 1: 19–24.

46. Kuchean is also known as Tocharian B. For a review of scholarship, see Hansen 2013, 70–77. For a seventh-century Tocharian B manuscript from Kizil, see THT 133 (http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_loader.a4d?pm=THT

133). Further texts can be found on the IDP website (http://idp.bl.uk) and in the TITUS database (http://titus.fk idg1.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/tocharic/tht.htm). A clear and brief introduction to the various Tocharian languages is in Krause and Slocum.

47. Beckwith 1987, 197–98.

48. Pan 1992, 129–30; Beckwith 1993, 106.

49. See n. 7 above.

50. Reischauer 1955b, 143–45.

51. An example of a single shoe like these can be found in the British Museum, reg. no. MAS.495 (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 16, http://idp.bl.uk/database/oo_loader.a4d?pm=MAS.495).

52. Schafer 1950, 181. This and most of the following references are from Chinese histories, sourced and translated by E. H. Schafer.

53. Schafer 1950, 180.

54. Schafer 1950, 182–83.

55. Schafer 1950, 180, 187.

56. Schafer 1950, 179–80. The Shaanxi History Museum has a glazed statue of a troup of musicians on a camel.

57. Schafer 1950, 189; this is from a tenth-century source.

58. The imperial explorers of this region in the early twentieth century discussed climate change, especially around Lop-nor (Lop Lake) in the Lop desert. For a discussion of these debates and how they were received, see Forêt 2008; Forêt 2013.

59. Herodotus, chap. 7, see translation by George Rawlinson on http://www.piney.com/Heredotus7.html.

60. See “The Horseman’s Tale” for more on breeds of horses.

61. Anxi, as named by the Chinese, means “Pacifying the West.” The present town is called Guazhou, but the old city is called Suoyang. See also Cable and French 1950, 85–86.

62. For a vivid early-twentieth-century account of desert travel between Anxi and Hami, see Cable and French 1950, 94–117.

63. Cable and French 1950, 112–13.

64. The existence of robbers was well attested and also illustrated, for example in Dunhuang Mogao Cave 45, south wall.

65. Skaff 2003, 503.

66. Schafer 1963, 75.

67. See Shigeshi 1936 for a description of the Chang’an market and the merchants’ guilds in the Tang. See also van Gulik 2003, chap. 7; Thilo 1996.

68. Beckwith 1987, 106; Pan 1992, 132–33. Pan Yihong puts the date as 732 though concurs that negotiations started in 730.

69. Gao Xianzhi (局仙芝) in Chinese, d. 756. Koguryo was a kingdom in the north of present-day Korea. See “The Soldier’s Tale” for an account of the decisive battle. For a discussion of Ko’s ethnicity in his career, see Skaff 2012, 88–91.

70. See “The Horseman’s Tale.”

71. For the Pamir campaign, see “The Soldier’s Tale.”

72. Only extracts survive in the Chinese history *Tongdian* (通典), chapters 192 and 193 (http://zh.wikisource.org/wiki/通典/卷192and193). See Smidt 2001 for an account of Du Huan’s travels in Africa. For China-Africa relations in pre-modern times, see Snow 1988, 1–36.

73. Following the retaking of the cities at the end of the rebellion, the Chinese ordered the massacre of “foreigners” (de la Vaissière 2005, 220–22; Lieu 1992, 231–34, 237–39). Xenophobia was also reflected in the poetry of the time (Hu-Sterk 2000).

CHAPTER 2. THE SOLDIER'S TALE

1. Adapted from Beckwith 1987, 109–10, from *Tongdian* 190:1023a, excerpts of Du Yu. I owe thanks to Sam van Schaik for comments on this chapter.

2. Individual soldiers rarely appear in historical sources, but we are fortunate in having many hundreds of woodslips, other documents, and some artifacts excavated from Tibetan forts on the Silk Road, namely at Mazar-Tagh and Miran. Takeuchi Tsuguhito has studied these extensively; his catalogue is in preparation. This chapter is not based on a single known historical figure but creates a composite character using information largely based on these historical sources and on Takeuchi's research for the everyday detail of a soldier's life (Thomas 1951 for transcriptions and translations). The major historical events are recorded in Chinese and Tibetan sources, including two copies of the Tibetan Annals discovered at Dunhuang (see Dotson 2009 for a translation). All these sources are available on http://idp.bl.uk. There are also surviving inscriptions (see Iwao, Hill and Takeuchi 2009).

3. Mackerras 1972, 30.

4. The name "Seg Lhaton" is taken from IOL Tib J 1359(B), a Tibetan document found at the Dunhuang Library Cave (see "The Artist's Tale"). See Thomas 1951, 80–84, 116.

5. Takeuchi (2004b, 53) suggests that families were sent with soldiers to the forts, although there is no specific evidence of this at Miran.

6. *Old Tibetan Chronicles* 4, quoted in Beckwith 1983, 16 n17, translated most recently in Dotson 2009.

7. For a recent accessible account of the rise and history of the Tibetan empire, see van Schaik 2011, chaps. 1 and 2. For a more detailed account of the early period, see Beckwith 1987. On Tibetan names, see Beckwith 2005.

8. Pan 1992. See Standen 2013 for an insightful model of the relationships between the powers of this period.

9. Koko-nor is north of the Tibetan plateau, in present-day Qinghai province, China. Wakhan and Little Balur are in present-day northeastern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, respectively.

10. The Chinese pilgrim monk Faxian traveled this way in the early fifth century on his way to India: "In this desert are many evil demons and hot winds: when encountered, then all die without exception. There are no flying birds above, no roaming beasts below, but everywhere as far as the eye can reach in search of an onwards route, it would be impossible to know the way but for dead men's decaying bones" (Beal 1884, xxiv). It took seventeen days to travel between Dunhuang and

Shanshan, the area of Miran.

11. For the early history of Miran, see Paula 1992.

12. Paula 1992, 81. Water tanks were also used during this period, but none have been identified to date at Miran. See Bertrand 2012.

13. For plans and for historical and modern photographs, see the IDP website (http://idp.bl.uk).

14. Takeuchi 2004b.

15. The men posted to hill stations might be there for as long as a year (Takeuchi 2004b, 53, quoting IOL Tib N 1629).

16. Thomas 1951, 437, translation of IOL Tib N 325 (M.I.vii.49).

17. This sequence of events was suggested by M. Aurel Stein based on his excavations of these rooms in the fort (1921, 348–49, 459–60).

18. The archaeologists had to deal with a "pervading smell of ammonia" (Stein 1912, 440).

19. For an account of Tibetan-Chinese relations over this period, see Demiéville 1952; Pan 1992, 132–33.

20. For an account of the Azha, also known as Tuyuhun, see Pelliot 1912; Mole 1970. For manuscripts relating to the Azha during this period, see Thomas 1951; Uray 1978. For a recent excavation of contemporary tombs in this area with interesting textile finds, see Heller and Xu 2006.

21. The bride was Princess Wencheng 文成 (Pan 1992, 118–19).

22. Demiéville 1952, 369.

23. Translation from Chinese histories in Beckwith 1978, 129–30.

24. Geshu Han 哥舒翰 (d. 757). He had Khotanese and Turkic parentage (de la Vaissière 2005, 218). See Skaff 2012, 89, for Geshu Han's patrons.

25. The following sequence of events is based on the Chinese historical reports *Zizhi Tongjian,* vol. 215 (translation in Chavannes 1903, 151, 152 n1), on their analysis by Stein during his exploration of the topography of this area (1921, 52–59), and on the author's own retracing of the battle site in 2004. See also Beckwith 1987, 130–32. There have been recent surveys by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture of Kansir fort, believed by Stein to be built by the Tibetans (Stein 1921, 68–70; Khan and Miller 2009.)

26. This and other "quotations" by Seg Lhaton are imaginary.

27. Having crossed the river there myself on horseback when it was in afternoon spate, I can imagine the considerable risks of getting an army across safely.

28. Suggested by Stein (1921, 53) to have been around present-day Shighnān, north of Khorog on the current Tajikistan/Afghanistan border.

29. The remains of at least one fort—Kansir—are there; see n. 25

above and figure 10.

30. For a firsthand account from ca. 839 of a Chinese official in Tibetan captivity for six years describing these practices, see Sperling 1979, 22–24; Demiéville 1952, 197–98. For an overview of the similar use of tattooing in the Chinese army, see Reed 2000, 19–24.

31. Sperling 1979, 24.

32. Beckwith 1987, 134.

33. The Chinese Tang emperors themselves had Turkic ancestry.

34. Rokshan is known in Chinese as An Lushan (see Pulleybank 1955).

35. See this chapter's epigraph and its source note; see also Bushell 1880. No chain mail has been found archaeologically, though this is not surprising as it would have been valuable and presumably removed from soldiers on the battlefield for reuse. Lacquer armor scales were found by Stein at Miran (British Museum, MAS 611/621; see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 109). Perhaps they were used as an indication of rank.

36. Thomas 1951, 425–26.

37. All of these weapons had been in use in China for many centuries (see Needham 1994, 27, 446).

38. For documents mentioning the "fatigue relieving corps," see Thomas 1955, 423, 464, quoting IOL Tib N 1703 (M.Tagh.a.IV.0087).

39. For toxic smoke bombs with ingredients including lime, sulphur, and arsenic, see Needham 1986, 123, 165–66, 343–44.

40. Li Bo 李白, "Fighting South of the Ramparts" (translation in Owen 1996, 244).

41. Du Fu 杜甫, "The Ballad of the Army Wagons" 兵车行 (translation in Owen 1996, 469). See http://www.chinese-poems.com/d16.html for Chinese and alternative translations.

42. Licorice, the root of Glycyrrhiza glabra L., is native to the Tsaidam basin and was well known as a generally useful herb for digestive complaints (Schafer 1963, 181); it continues to be used. See http://www.avogel.ch/en/plant-encyclopaedia/glycyrrhiza_glabra.php.

CHAPTER 3. THE HORSEMAN'S TALE

1. Translation after Schafer 1963, 96. I owe thanks to Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst and Simone-Christiane Raschmann for their comments on this chapter.

2. Kutlug is a frequently used and well-known personal Uygur name meaning "fortunate, happy, blessed." See Clauson 1972, 601. It is found in many manuscripts—for example, those from the Turfan region now in Berlin, such as U 5582, Ch/U 7362 v. It was also used as an element in his title by the first ruler of the Uygur empire (Kutlug Bilge Kül Khagan, r. 744–47). This chapter is not based on a single known historical figure, however, but creates a composite character using information mainly from textual and archaeological primary sources, as cited below.

3. Sinor, Geng, and Kychanov 1998, 192.

4. For examples of Turkic dress and accoutrements, such as daggers, see Whitfield 2010, 58–59. However, these date from an earlier era, and there is a dearth of published material dating to this period of Turkic dominance. The 2005 British Academy sought to address this but concentrated on art and manuscripts (Roxburgh 2005). We have much more evidence from the Uygurs, who settled in the Tarim following the end of their empire, including manuscripts and murals (Roxburgh 2005, 42–59; Härtel and Yaldiz 1982, 169–72).

5. Tarpans, though now driven almost to extinction, are still to be found on the western steppe of Dzungaria in southern Mongolia (Schafer 1963, 61).

6. For the Khazars and Bulgars, see "The Writer's Tale." On the composition of the Uygurs, see Pulleybank 1956. The Seljuk Turks, who migrated to Anatolia, were descendants of the Uygurs' Turkic western neighbors.

7. This is roughly the area of present-day Mongolia. At that time, the Türgesh controlled the region to the west, to the borders of Sogdia (see "The Merchant's Tale"). No single comprehensive history of the Turks in this region exists, but brief narratives are given in Barfield 1992; Cheng 1994; Sinor and Klyashtorny 1996; Sinor, Geng, and Kychanov 1998; and helpfully summarized in Skaff 2012, 35–39.

8. For the Uygur empire, see Mackerras 1990; Sinor 1997; Barfield 1992, 150–60. Mackerras 1973 gives a translation of passages in the Chinese histories relating to the Uygurs and a survey of other sources (1–7), and Kamalov 2003 discusses the Shine Usu inscription. The account of Tamīm ibn Baḥr, an Arab envoy to the Uygurs, is translated and discussed in Minorsky 1948.

9. Sinor and Klyashtorny 1996, 328–30. For an overview of Turkic beliefs in this period, see Zieme 2005.

10. Ordu-Balik was called Karabalghasun in Turkic. Ordu-Balik is a more recent Mongol name. See Hüttel and Erdenebat Ulambayar 2009 for Ordu-Balik. See Skaff 2012, 150–52, for a discussion of Turkic city building.

11. This was reported by Tamīm ibn Baḥr (Minorsky 1948, 283). See also Skaff 2012, 150–51.

12. On the relationship between the Turks and Sogdians before the Uygur empire, see Pulleybank 1952. The Sogdians' involvement in the building of a second Uygur city on the Selenga river is mentioned in the Shine Usu inscription (Sinor, Geng, Kychanov 1998, 192).

13. This is a quotation cited in Chinese sources and ascribed to a Uygur adviser to the Khagan (Mackerras 1973, 40). Kutlug's grandfather, like Kutlug, is a fictional character.

14. Rokshan was probably adopted, and so his birth ethnicity is unknown. Beckwith 2009, 145 n19, cites the sources.

15. Skaff 2012, 226.

16. For a description and depictions of dancers, see Juliano and Lerner 2001, cats. 81, 82.

17. Schafer 1963, 167.

18. Schafer 1963, 71. The story is told in *Yang Taizhen wai zhuan*, written in the Song period.

19. Quoted in Schafer 1963, 158.

20. Schafer 1963, 56.

21. Poem by Li Yu (937–78), ruler of the Southern Tang dynasty. "Rain and clouds" was a traditional Chinese literary expression for sexual intercourse; the *locus classicus* is a text of the third century BC (van Gulik 2003, 214–15).

22. For these incidents, see Schafer 1963, 77, 101.

23. For the An Lushan Rebellion, see Pulleybank 1955; des Rotours 1962; Twitchett 1979, 561–85.

24. For Chinese accounts of diplomatic relations between the Chinese and Uygurs over this period, see des Rotours 1962; Mackerras 1969, 221–25; Mackerras 1972, 14–32.

25. For more information on the sack of Luoyang, see des Rotours 1962. It was not the first time the city had been sacked; see Jenner 1981.

26. Pan 1992, 137.

27. On border markets, see Skaff 2012, 262–66.

28. Mackerras 1969, 218. Christopher Beckwith suggests that one bolt might never have been a real price (2009, 393–94 n26). For a table of

listed prices at Xizhou market in 742, ranging from seven to twenty-two bolts of silk, see Skaff 2012, 264. Silk was a currency at this time (see Wong 2004, 14–15).

29. For Uygur conversion, see Pelliot and Chavannes 1911/13; Zieme 2005, 34–35; Lieu 1992, 234–35. For contemporary Manichaean manuscripts, see Härtel and Yaldiz 1982, 174–81; Gulásci 2005.

30. For a summary of Tängrism and an assessment that there was no evidence of shamanism at this period, see Zieme 2005, 33–34. See also Dankoff 1975; López-Pavillard 2013.

31. Kökturk is also known as runic. Brāhmī, an Indian script, and Manichaean script (http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/manichean-script) were also used for writing Uygur. There are extant manuscripts and inscriptions in all these scripts. For examples, see Turfanforschung 2013. See also Sertkaya 2005 for a summary of Turkic languages and scripts.

32. Mackerras 1973, 88.

33. Larry Clarke and Tasaka Kōdō both suggest that the coup was anti-Manichaean. Clarke 2009, 71; for Kōdō, see Mackerras 1973, 152–53 n146.

34. There was already a community of sinicized Sogdians in northwest China by this time (see Rong 2006; Luo 1996).

35. Twitchett 1979, 593.

36. Mackerras 1973, 37.

37. Mackerras 1973, 37–38.

38. Mackerras 1973, 153 n150. On clothing at this time, see Harada 1935; Shen 2012.

39. Mackerras 1973, 34, 49, 86, 87.

40. Erkes 1940. Horses were bred both by the government and privately (Skaff 2012, 262). See also Sinor 1972.

41. Horses were 15–16 hands (ponies in the cavalry unit of the First Emperor were 13–14 hands) with a narrow body, long back, long legs, and small hoofs. A possible modern descendant is the Akhal-Teke. For discussion of horses in China at that time, see Schafer 1963, 58–70, esp. 60–61.

42. Schafer 1963, 61, ascribed to the Turkmen's Arab stock. Schafer notes that this feature of Arab horses was also admired in the west in antiquity, citing the Roman poet Virgil (Virgil, *Georgica* iii. 87, "At duplex agiture per lumbos spina," 295 n26).

43. Although it is not certain where or when the rigid stirrups were invented, their earliest known depiction is ca. AD 322 in a Chinese tomb near Nanjing (see Dien 2000). For Tang tack, see Cooke 2000, 49–52,

cats. 139, 145.

44. Schafer 1963, 58.

45. Schafer 1963, 58.

46. For the Uygur/Chinese horse trade, see Schafer 1963, 63–64; Skaff 2012, 262–70.

47. Schafer 1963, 186. Cable and French 1950, 87, reports a medicine with similar properties in the early twentieth century using a related *curcuma,* ginger, along with "tears" or fungus growing on the *wutong* tree (梧牛同 *Firmiana simplex*), along with wormwood, fennel, apricot kernels, and rhubarb.

48. On the composition of the Uygurs, see Pulleybank 1956.

49. See Laufer 1937.

50. Products of the black poplar are still widely used today as dye, soap, and medicine (Yasin Ashuri, personal correspondence in ca. 1999).

51. Schafer 1963, 93–96; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 236–37.

52. The use of eagles for hunting is still practiced today in Central Asia.

53. Van Gulik 2003, 171; Thilo 1997, 233–36.

54. However, it is worth treating these accounts of Uygur behavior in Chang'an with some caution. As Mackerras (1973, 32) notes, Chinese histories are the main source for the reports of violence of the Uygurs in Chang'an.

55. For contemporary accounts of the Kimek Turks, see Ibn al-Faqih, Gardēzī, and al-Idrisi, quoted in Asimov and Bosworth 1998, 70–71.

56. Mackerras 1973, 32.

57. Mackerras 1973, 34–35.

58. For an account of these battles in Beshbalik (Beiting in Chinese), see Ecsedy 1964; Moriyasu 1973.

59. Mackerras 1973, 30.

60. Pan 1992, 137–43.

61. Mackerras 1973, 163 n 193; Skaff 2012, 190–91; Eberhard 1948.

62. Article 87 of the Tang Code (see Johnson 1997, 53).

63. Mackerras 1973, 68, 69, 136–37 n69.

CHAPTER 4. THE PRINCESS'S TALE

1. Cai Yan, Lady Wen, was captured in AD 192 by a raiding party and became wife to a Xiongnu, but was later ransomed and returned to Chang'an. Her authorship of this series of poems is not certain. See Chang and Saussy 1999, 22–23, for discussion and translation.

2. Princess Taihe is a historical figure, and this chapter recounts the main events of her life, found mainly in the Chinese dynastic histories. For a review and translation of the main sources, see Mackerras 1969, 218, 235–36, 238; Mackerras 1972, 114–22.

3. See "The Horseman's Tale" for a discussion of horse breeds and tackle. See Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cats. 174–79, for contemporary depictions of Tang women in painting and sculpture.

4. For references to these products and those mentioned below, see Schafer 1963.

5. For an example of this type of necklace buried with a Sui princess, see Watt et al. 2004, 294–95 (cat. 187). For the seven jewels of Buddhism and their role in trade, see Liu 1994, 92–102; Sen 2003, 185–92.

6. See "The Writer's Tale" and Laufer 1905.

7. Schafer 1963, 56. For a description and depictions of dancers, see Juliano and Lerner 2001, cats. 81, 82.

8. Poem by Lady Xu, consort of the ruler of Shu in southwest China, Meng Chang (r. 935–36). See Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cats 175–76, for sculptures of female polo players.

9. For horses in the Tang, stables, and polo playing, see Schafer 1963, 58–70.

10. Li Po, "Tian ma ge" (Song of the Heavenly Horses), translation after Schafer 1963, 60.

11. Schafer 1963, 67–68.

12. Zhou 1987, 250–51, cats. 417–20.

13. Mackerras 1972, 86–87; see also "The Horseman's Tale."

14. Schafer 1963, 66.

15. Mackerras 1972, 63–69.

16. Mackerras 1972, 106–7.

17. Mackerras 1972, 97–99.

18. Mackerras 1972, 114–15, 174–75.

19. Some of these ordinations might have been temporary expedient measures, such as the case of Princess Taiping, who was sent to a monastery to avoid marriage to a Tibetan in the 670s (Holmgren 1990, 46).

20. Robert van Gulik points out that not all nunneries were places of

seclusion; some were known for their drinking parties and dinners (1961, 175). He recounts the case of Yu Xuanji (c. 844–c. 871), who entered the Xianyiguan Daoist nunnery in Chang'an and there met a young poet with whom she had an affair.

21. Mackerras 1972, 114–17.

22. Pan 1992, 143–47, translation on 156–58.

23. "Since ancient times we Chinese have fought against the barbarian many times and we have always made use of the crossbow. . . . [They] are effective at long range and cannot be matched by the bows of the Huns" (Needham 1994, 123). For carriage-mounted crossbows, termed arcuballista, see Needham 1994, 192. For gunpowder, see Needham 1986.

24. This was often a reciprocal arrangement (Holmgren 1990). See also Skaff 2012, 203–7 (for a review) and 211–12 (for a table of such alliances). Similar marriage alliances between the steppe and the settled are seen in other Eurasian cultures in this period, such as between the Turkic Khazars and Byzantine Rome. See Christian 1998, 292, for examples in the seventh and eighth centuries.

25. Twitchett 1979, 317. The sending of princes to neighbors as "ransoms to peace" was also a common part of diplomacy among the powers of central Asia.

26. As Thomas Barfield points out (1992, 160 n17), the young man was not accepted for marriage as he was not an heir to the throne. He remained among the Turks for several years and, on his return, continued to wear Turkic dress, marrying a Chinese princess in 708.

27. Han Yu 韓愈 (768–824); see Gernet 1995, 237–38. A translation of the memorial is downloadable at http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/hanyu_bone_ of_buddha.pdf.

28. For a discussion of wine in Tang China, see Schafer 1963, 141–45.

29. Schafer 1963, 143.

30. Liu Yuxi (772–842), translated after Theos. Sampson, quoted in Schafer 1963, 144–45.

31. See "The Horseman's Tale."

32. Lieu 1992, 193.

33. This poem was ascribed to the niece of the emperor, Liu Xinjun, sent to marry a Wusun leader in the second century BC (Idema and Grant 2004, 91).

34. Mackerras 1972, 120–21.

35. For studies of the city, see Kiselev 1957; Khudayakov 1990.

36. The gold tent was noted by the traveler Tamīm ibn Baḥr (translation in Minorsky 1948, 283).

37. For women's dress, see Shen 2012 and numerous depictions in contemporary paintings and sculptures.

38. See Härtel and Yaldiz 1982, cat. 109, for a wall painting showing Uygur female donors to the cave's construction.

39. Larry Clarke notes that the sun and moon element was not included in the title of rulers from 779 to 795 because they were not Manichaeans (2009, 71).

40. Minorsky 1948.

41. Needham 1983.

42. Van Gulik 2003, 193.

43. Van Gulik 2003, 189.

44. Mackerras 1972, 66–69.

45. Mackerras 1972, 122; Eberhard 1948.

46. Sinor, Geng, and Kychanov 1998, 198.

47. Sinor, Geng, and Kychanov 1998, 197–98.

48. Sinor, Geng, and Kychanov 1998, 198.

49. Drompp 2005, 38.

50. The following account describes some key events of the standoff over the following two years, which involved far more complexity than suggested here. See Drompp 2005, 39–42, for a detailed narrative.

51. See Drompp 2005, 113–14, for a description of the attack.

52. Shahushan 殺胡山 (Drompp 2005, 114).

53. This was reported by the Japanese monk, Ennin, an eyewitness to her return (Reischauer 1955a, 326–27). Her return is discussed in Drompp 2005, 120–23.

CHAPTER 5. THE COURTESAN'S TALE

1. Translation after Schafer 1963, 21.

2. Larishka is a typical Tocharian personal name of the time found in numerous sources. Douglas Adams lists it as a "PN in monastic records" and gives the text reference "465a2" (2013, 591). He also adds: "A second diminutive of lare" (with long a) that he identifies as "(adj) dear, beloved." (2013, 595). Thanks to Desmond Durkin-Meisterernst for help with these sources. We have no record of a courtesan named Larishka. She is an imagined character, but the events and details of her life are attested. Regarding pet dogs, see Schafer 1963, 77–78.

3. Van Gulik 2003, 186; Schafer 1963, 214.

4. There is, as yet, no detailed history of Kucha in English, but short histories can be found in Geng 1998; Hansen 2013, 56–82. See also Chao et al. 1987 for the archaeology.

5. For Kuchean music and its influence in China, see Schafer 1963, 50–52.

6. Schafer 1963, 52.

7. Schafer 1963, 53.

8. Schafer 1963, 53.

9. Schafer 1963, 55.

10. Contemporary accounts of Kucha are given by several travelers, including the famous Chinese pilgrim monk Xuanzang (Beal 1884, 1: 19–24).

11. For the Uygurs in Ganzhou, see Moriyasu 2000a.

12. Moriyasu argues for Uygur control of Kocho before this (1981, 203–4), but Beckwith disagrees (1987, 170–71 n179). For the Uygurs in Kocho, see Geng 1998.

13. See "The Pilgrim's Tale" for similar legends relating to Vaiśravaṇa and Khotan.

14. Schafer 1963, 218.

15. See "The Pilgrim's Tale."

16. This refers to the Mogao Caves. Orchestras and dancers are shown in the large depictions of Paradise in numerous caves. See, e.g., Cave 220 (Fan 2010, 118–19).

17. Van Gulik 2003, 192, 203–7. A manuscript of this text was found at Dunhuang and is now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris (Pelliot chinois 2539). See also Umekawa 2005 for a discussion on this text and its place in medical history.

18. Van Gulik 2003, 205–6.

19. Van Gulik 2003, 171.

20. For details of the courtesan district and its practices at that time,

see Van Gulik 2003, 170–72, 179–80.

21. Van Gulik 2013, 182.

22. Schafer 1963, 172.

23. Schafer 1963, 21. In a footnote, he mentions a recorded instance of a payment of 300,000 cash.

24. Schafer 1963, 157.

25. Schafer 1963, 158.

26. Schafer 1963, 198.

27. Yu Xuanji. Her story is told in van Gulik 2013, 172–75; the poem is translated on 174.

28. “Onycha is an aromatic derived from the operculum of a gastropod mollusk” (Schafer 1963, 175).

29. Benn 2002, 101.

30. Schafer 1963, 162–63.

31. From a poem by Li Bo, after a translation by Schafer (1963, 21)

32. For a historical account of the rebellion, see Twitchett 1979, 727–62.

33. The following is largely based on a contemporary narrative poem, “The Lament of the Lady of Qin,” known from bibliographical sources but thought to be lost before the discovery of several manuscripts at Dunhuang. See Giles 1925–26 for a translation; see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 246, for one of the manuscripts from Dunhuang now in the British Library (Or.8210/S.5477). Nugent (2007) discusses the different manuscripts from Dunhuang.

34. Recorded by Abū Zayd al-Sīrāfī. See Reinaud 1845, 64–65; Gernet 1995, 292; Bretschneider 1871, 10.

35. For the Uygurs in Kocho, see Geng 1998; Moriyasu 2000a.

CHAPTER 6. THE PILGRIM'S TALE

1. Beal 1884, 148.

2. Although copper coins were common currency, by the mid-ninth century they were rare in Dunhuang (see Trombert 2013), and it is possible that the monk was paid in some other form, such as with a cup of grain.

3. The remedy is given in a Chinese manuscript from Dunhuang now in the British Library (Or.8210/S.76), dated 934 (Giles 1940, 333).

4. There are several people in the Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarangiṇī* (the twelfth-century history of Kashmir) with the name Chudda, all mentioned in book 8 (see Stein 1900, 183, 454, 1570). However, I have used the name Chudda for a composite character, formed of information about Buddhism, monks, and medicine in Dunhuang at this time. In addition to the Dunhuang Library Cave manuscripts and Stein's accounts, I am indebted to several scholars for this chapter, especially Vivienne Lo for the medical knowledge.

5. For lists of monasteries in Dunhuang, see Fujieda 1959.

6. The earliest dated printed documents known are from the second half of the ninth century (notably, Or.8210/P.2, dated 868, the Buddhist *Diamond Sutra*, and Or.8210/P.6, an almanac for 877, both from Dunhuang and now in the British Library), but they show a sophistication indicating that printing was not a new technology. The earliest extant printed prayer sheets are from the tenth century (O.8210/P.8, P.9; see "The Artist's Tale") and were probably based on models of manuscript prayer sheets.

7. Whitfield 1998.

8. See Schafer 1963, 176–94; Unschild 1986; Zhang 1990; and Lo and Cullen 2005, 369–73 (list compiled by Penelope Barrett) for medicine of the time. Schafer notes that "Exotic medicines continued to come into China in abundance. In particular, they tended to accumulate in Buddhist temples" (183). Schafer also gives a source for medicines sent from Kashmir.

9. For Chinese *materia medica*, see Schafer 1963, 178; Unschild 1986.

10. Beckwith 1979.

11. Van Gulik 1956, 152–53.

12. Unschild 1985, 41–42.

13. Stein 1900, 9.

14. In 819 a Chinese official, Han Yu, sent a memorial to the emperor criticizing these practices, in the context of a procession of Buddhist relics from the Famen Temple to Chang'an, and railing against Buddhism.

For a translation, see afe.easia.columbia.edu/ps/cup/hanyu_bone_of_buddha.pdf. *The Biographies of Eminent Monks* gives many other examples (see Kieschnick 1997, 35–42). For a general discussion of such practices, see Benn 2007; Jan 1965. That such practices continued into twentieth-century Chinese Buddhism is shown in Prip-Møller 1937, 320–24.

15. Benn 2007, 61. For a Chinese intepretation of *The Lotus Sutra*, see ibid., 54–65, esp. 62–65 on the Chinese translation.

16. Kieschnick 1997, 21. Kieschnick notes that this was the basis for Tolstoy's story "Father Sergius" (156 n31).

17. Kieschnick 1997, 22, 120. A similar story is associated with Kucha, told by Xuanzang (Beal 1884, 22–23). When he has to deputize for the king, the official castrates himself and presents the severed parts in a golden casket to the king, telling him not to open it until his return home. When he returns, the king is told slanderous stories about the deputy "debauching himself." The king confronts the deputy, who tells him to open the casket—and the king is duly chastised.

18. Van Gulik 2003, 207.

19. Xuanzang had stayed in Kashmir from 631 to 633, studying Buddhism (see Wriggins 2004, 73–76).

20. There are records of many Kashmiri monks traveling to China. For a summary, see Khosa 1984, 22–24.

21. For Mañjuśrī and Mount Wutai, see Birnbaum 1986; Birnbaum 1996; Lamotte 1960. For pilgrimage, see Naquin and Yü 1992; Debreczeny 2011. Ennin provides a contemporary account, having traveled there in 840 (see Reischauer 1955a, 214–51).

22. This was the period leading to the end of the Karkota dynasty, which fell in 855 (see Stein 1900, 96–97).

23. Ten miles a day might be considered a reasonable average; it took Ennin forty-two days of travel—not including rest days—to go from Chang'an to Mount Wutai. But this is not including the stops and religious sightseeing along the way. However, Reischauer points out that Ennin and his companions sometimes managed sixty *li* a day—or about twenty miles (1959b, 141).

24. Ennin gives numerous references to his lodgings on his travels through China, including to Mount Wutai. For a discussion of travel and lodging, see Reischauer 1955b, 143–49.

25. Beckwith 1987, 168–69.

26. For the western gate, see Stein 1896, 8, 22, which also summarizes the accounts of Xuanzang and Wukong, who came to Kashmir by this route. See also Wriggins 2004, 52; Julien 1851, 90; Beal 1884, 119–35

(for Xuanzang in Udyāna), 136–52 (for Taxila to Srinigar). Roads through this landscape today still often follow ancient routes, dictated by the geography, following the same rivers and crossing the same mountain passes. Stein traced sections of these routes from 1896 onward and described his journeys in his many publications, referring always to the historical sources. Relevant citations are given below. The timings are based on the experiences reported by these previous travelers. See Stein 1907, 2–4.

27. Wukong and Xuanzang both stayed here (Stein 1930, 7–8). The monastery at Huṣkara is near the modern-day village of Uskür (Stein 1900, I.168).

28. Called Taxila by the Greeks, the name by which it is known today. For excavation reports of the ancient city, see Marshall 1951.

29. Scholars agree that Taxila was a center of learning, though some dispute whether it deserves to be called a "university." (See, e.g., Needham 1969, 135: "When the men of Alexander the Great came to Taxila in India in the fourth century BC they found a university there the like of which had not been seen in Greece, a university which taught the three Vedas and the eighteen accomplishments and was still existing when the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hsien went there about AD 400.")

30. De Sélincourt 1971, 266, 350.

31. For Aśoka in Taxila, see Thapur 1961. For a comprehensive bibliography of the inscriptions in Taxila, see Nakamura 1987, 90–92, with bibliographical footnotes.

32. Marshall 1951, 230–94. For other references, see King 2010.

33. Inscriptions are at present-day Shahbazgarah, just northeast of Mardan.

34. Stein visited the Swat valley in 1896, 1897, 1906, and 1926, recorded in Stein 1921, 1929, and 1930. See also Deane 1896. Stein summarizes the reports of the Chinese pilgrims Xuanzang and Wukong to Udyāna (1921, 14–16).

35. Beal 1884, 120.

36. See Bischoff 1978; Jackson 1979; Guenther 1996.

37. Stein 1921, 13, from Songyun's and Xuanzang's accounts. Identified by Stein as Gumbatai ruins near Tursak. For identification of other Buddhist sites in the Swat Valley, see Stein 1921, 13–20.

38. See "The Official's Tale."

39. Stein 1930, 50, figs. 37, 38.

40. Noted by Deane (1898), who also took an impression of the carving. Faxian, Songyun, and Xuanzang all mention these sites, summarized in Stein 1930, 56–58, 60, 65, 102.

41. Known today as Saidgai Lake.

42. Stein 1930, 58; Watters 1904–5, i.231; Julien 1851, I.135, 141. For the Nāga's conversion to Buddhism, see Strong 1992, 26–28.

43. Recounted in Kalhaṇa's *Rājatarangiṇī* (see Stein 1900, I.204–67). See also Vogel 1926, 241–43.

44. Through present-day Dir and then to Chitral. For Dir to Chitral, see Stein 1921. Stein notes that Wukong took a different routes and surmises it might have been to avoid areas of political uncertainty at the time (1921, 17–19).

45. Across the Lowari pass (see Stein 1912, 21–29). Stein crossed at night to avoid possible avalanches set off by the sun; it was early May.

46. See "The Soldier's Tale."

47. Hamilton 1979, 49–50.

48. Such pathways are still in use today in this area. Stein, as ever, is sanguine about their dangers: "Elsewhere it might be thought a test for one's nerves to trot along such a precipitous track with the river hundreds of feet below. But one soon learns to share the Chitralis' unbounded confidence in their ponies" (1912, 32). He does, however, report at least one pony falling off the track—fortunately not seriously injured.

49. Stein gives a detailed description of this route (1904, 57–72).

50. Stein 1907, 33–40.

51. For the Chinese lore of jade, see Laufer 1946.

52. For contemporary accounts of Khotan and its monasteries, see Abel-Rémusat 1820 and Xuanzang, translation in Beal 1884, 309–22.

53. For a summary of founding legends of Khotan and Vaiśravaṇa, see Stein 1907, 156–66; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 136–37.

54. Schafer 1963, 268. A century before, the Khotanese painter Viśa Irasangä (in Chinese, Yiseng 乙僧) had become famous in China, painting in a different style (Bailey 1979, 16–17; Soper 1951, 11; Schafer 1963, 32, 287 n210; Nagahiro 1955).

55. Recorded by Xuanzang (see Stein 1907, 455–56).

56. See "The Soldier's Tale."

57. For a discussion of pilgrimage westward from China, see Galambos and van Schaik 2012, 35–74, based on a tenth-century manuscript found at Dunhuang.

58. For contemporary accounts of the 845 persecution of Buddhism, see Reischauer 1955a, 340–44, 347–48, 373; Reischauer 1955b, chap. 7.

59. Simple depictions of Mount Wutai from this period can be found in Caves 159 and 361 (Wong 1993, 41). The large painting on the back wall of Dunhuang Mogao Cave 61 is dated by Wong to ca. 947–57, but Debreczeny (2011, 11 n19) points out that members of the Dunhuang

Research Academy have recently revised the paintings to the fourteenth century.

60. See “The Princess’s Tale.”

61. Ennin reported being turned away, though the villagers were suffering from illness (Reischauer 1955a, 188–89).

62. Another experience reported by Ennin (Reischauer 1955a, 189).

63. See Lieu 1992, 128–31.

64. Wong 1993, 38, citing Chinese histories. See Debreczeny 2011 for a discussion of later Tibetan involvement in Mount Wutai.

65. See Kapstein 2000, 63–65.

66. The hexagonal, two-story, revolving bookcase is found today in the Ming-period Sutra Hall (Can Jing Ge) but predates it. It is not known if it dates back to the ninth century. A monk named Fuxi is recorded to have invented revolving book-cases in 544, and they became popular. A record exists from 863 of a revolving bookcase in a Buddhist monastery in Suzhou. See Prip-Møller 1937, 55–58 (for examples of revolving bookcases), 51–58 (for Buddhist libraries). See also Drège 1991 for libraries in China.

67. See “The Artist’s Tale.”

68. Stein 1900, 96–97.

CHAPTER 7. THE WRITER'S TALE

1. Imam al-Shafi'i was a jurist whose ideas later formed the basis of a school of jurisprudence. He was also a poet. For the translation, see http://lifetimesandcrimes.wordpress.com/2012/06/27/imam-ash-shafiee-on-travel/. I owe thanks to Nile Green for this chapter.

2. Ibn Rustah is a historical figure, a Persian whose great work of geography survives today. His dates are uncertain, but he traveled to Medina in 903. I am taking the liberty of assuming he still had a few decades of life after this—there is no evidence either way—and the story is therefore set in what I imagine to be his old age, in about 935. Apart from his visit to Medina, he probably did not travel to the places he described. It was therefore tempting to base this chapter instead on an Arab writer, Ibn Fadlān, who traveled as a diplomatic envoy to the Rus in 921–22 and left a detailed account. However, I wanted to keep the focus closer to Central Asia and include both Persian as well as Arabic elements. See Maqbul 2013b for a summary of Ibn Rustah's life; see Wiet 1955 for a translation of his geography (into French).

3. Wiet 1955, 79, 81.

4. Bosworth (2011b) suggests that ibn Rustah did not travel other than to Medina. However, as Touati points out, "Muslim men of letters of the Middle Ages were mad for travel . . . because travel brought them, through suffering, into learning as a way of life" (2010, 1).

5. This work on geography survives today but is mentioned as the seventh part of a much greater work of knowledge, *Kitāb al-A'lāk an-Nafīsa* (Maqbul 2013b). However, no other parts of this work are known, and it is not clear if they were ever completed.

6. Wiet 1955, 175–88.

7. Kamaly 2012. See also http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/isfahan-xviii-jewish-community.

8. For a summary of knowledge about medieval Isfahan, see Gaub 2008, 163–73; Paul 2000; Dumper and Stanley 2007; Khadra Jayyusi 2008.

9. See Wiet 1955, 175–88.

10. Wiet 1955, 179, 190.

11. Daryaee 2002.

12. Translation after Daryaee 2002, 303.

13. "Abu Ja'far Aḥmad b. Mahdi b. Rostam (d. 272/886; Abu No'aym, I, pp. 85–86), a man of substantial means who could afford to spend three hundred thousand derhams on his personal library" (Kamaly 2012).

14. Bloom 2001; Roper 2013a.

15. Printed texts also appeared at this time (see Carter 1955; Roper 2013b).

16. Abū Ma‘shar (b. 787) wrote a number of astronomical works (see Pingree 1970; Pingree 2011). For Indian astronomical knowledge of this time and its influence on Iran, see Pingree 1963.

17. It was common at that time for geographies to include discussions of astronomy.

18. Ibn Khordadbeh was a ninth-century author of the earliest surviving Arabic book of administrative geography; he was brought up in Baghdad but compiled his book in Samarra in 846 (see Bosworth 2011a).

19. Appearing in the Qur’an (as well as the Old Testament), Gog and Magog refer to apocalyptic peoples. Alexander the Great (353–323 BC) was supposed to have built a barrier to keep them at bay. Gog and Magog are names probably derived from Syriac: in Arabic they are *Ya’ jūj wa-Ma’ jūj*. See Van Donzel and Ott 2012.

20. Van Donzel and Schmidt 2010, 71.

21. See Van Donzel 2013 for a summary of Sallam’s journey. Samarra, north of Baghdad on the Tigris river, had been established as a new capital by the caliph’s predecessor and father in 836.

22. It is also possible that Sallam was Jewish, as suggested in van Donzel and Schmidt 2010.

23. There has been considerable scholarly debate about the veracity of Sallam’s account, the actual destination of his journey, and what he identified as the barriers. Van Donzel 2013 summarizes this and concludes that Sallam did indeed reach Hami and that the barriers were the famous Jade Gates (Yumen) in the Gobi desert. For the Uygurs, see “The Horseman’s Tale.”

24. The story of Issac ben Yahuda, a tenth-century merchant of Oman, is told in the *Kitāb al-Ajab al Hind* (Marvels of India), a collection of tales —some more fanciful than others—gathered by Captain Buzurg ibn Shahriyār of Ramhormuz, a shipmaster sailing out of Siraf on the Persian gulf. See Buzurg ibn Shahriyār 1928.

25. See Maqbul 2013a. See Chaffee 2008a and 2008b on Muslim traders at Quanzhou from the tenth century, though, as Chaffee points out, the rise of Quanzhou during that period was at a time China was in disarray and the port was independent of any central power (2008a, 102). For Chinese traders, see Lo 1952; Lo 1970.

26. See “Prologue: The Shipmaster’s Tale.”

27. See Ierusalimskaya 2014 for a description of some of the eighth- to ninth-century burials in this area containing, among other items, silks made in China, Sogdia, and Byzantium. See also Laufer 1919 for transmissions between the two cultures.

28. Perhaps the empires declined, as Chaffee points out in relation to Khanfu (Guangzhou, Canton), because of the decline in central power (2008a, 102–3).

29. The Battle of the Talas River in 751 was won by the Arabs. Among the Chinese prisoners of war were, it is said, paper makers and silk weavers who shared their skills with the Arabs. However, it is possible that these technologies had already started filtering across from the Tarim, as both were known there by that time (see Bloom 2001).

30. See Chen 2012 for a detailed discussion of the Tang's Turkic ancestry.

31. Spuler 1960, 29.

32. "For about two decades [after the end of Samanid rule in 913], various warlords fought each other over the control of Isfahan and the surrounding hinterland. Enormous numbers of tribally organized Deylami, Kurdish, and Turkish troops led by a series of Deylami warlords threatened the very fabric of urban and rural life in Isfahan as well as in other lands of the caliphate" (Kamaly 2012, based on Lambton 2012–13).

33. For Buyid coinage, see Treadwell 2001. Regarding the new city wall, see Kamaly 2012.

34. For the origins of the Buyids, see Minorsky 1996, 193.

35. Mentioned by the tenth-century Arab geographer Al-Muqaddasī and cited in Bosworth 2002.

36. All these regions are covered in Ibn Rustah's geography (see Wiet 1955).

37. The term used by Ibn Rustah and others is "Rus." It is probably derived from an Old Norse term meaning "the men who row." However, there has been a long debate about the ethnicity of the Rus, most especially concerning any relationship with Slavic peoples and the extent of Viking involvement in the formation of Russia (the Normanist Controversy). For recent studies, see Pritsak 1981; Franklin and Shepard 1996; Danylenko 2004. Montgomery 2000 discusses the use of the term by Arab authors and suggests it is "a perilous argument" to assume, as many have done, that the Arab authors mean the same thing when they use this term: "It is a distinct possibility that the medieval Arabs themselves were perplexed as to the exact identity of the Rūs, confusing, say, two different peoples" (3) . This is not to suggest that all the traders who came via the Volga route were Scandinavians nor to make any judgment about the Normanist Controversy; I leave that to the experts in this field.

38. Lewis 1958; Williams et al. 2014.

39. For a history of the Khazars, see Dunlop 1967; Golden 1970.

40. Thomas Noonan (1998) discusses the coin hoards, their origins and dating, in some detail in several articles.

41. England was the nearest source of silver, mined since Roman times.

42. Now known as Old Ladoga—Staraia Ladoga—six miles south of the shores of Lake Ladoga, east of present-day St. Petersburg and reached through the Neva river from the Baltic. Noonan 1998, 346, suggests the presence of Scandinavians here from the mid-eighth century but also notes that Soviet scholars have argued for a later date.

43. For a reproduction of an excavated lake and coast ship dating from ca. 820, "The Oseberg Ship," see http://www.wikinger.speyer.de/index.php?id=11&L=1&B=1.

44. This was called the Varanigian Trade Route. A contemporary source notes a group of Swedes who arrived in Constantinople in 839 but sought another way home because of "savage people" endangering their safe return (Noonan 1998, 345). See also Noonan 1987–91.

45. He uses the term "Saqaliba," which derives from the word "Slavs" but was used to refer to European slaves more generally.

46. "The ruler of Rum" means the Byzantine empire.

47. Khamlij was probably on the Volga delta into the Caspian near the present-day village of Samosdelka. Dmitry Vasil'ev has carried out many years of excavation there and argues that this was the site of Atil, the capital of the Khazars (2003). See also http://www.khazaria.com/atil.html.

48. Golden 2012.

49. As noted by the contemporary writers Al-Mas'udi and Al-Muqaddasī, respectively, cited in Golden 2012.

50. See Hampton 2011, which argues that many of these swords were acquired by raids and in battle since their sale to the Vikings was prohibited by Charles the Bald in 864. Swords were originally pattern welded; see http://natmus.dk/en/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/weapons/swords/. For the superior "Ulfberht" sword, which was produced from the ninth century, see http://www.wikinger.speyer.de/index.php?id=11&L=1&B=14.

51. Such swords are described by the Monk of St Gall in his ninth-century *The Life of Charlemagne* (Lewis 1958, 223 n206).

52. Logan 1992.

53. Al-Mas'udi, quoted in Franklin and Shepard 1996, 69.

54. Some scholars suggest that, by this time, the Bulgars acted as middlemen for trade and that many Rus did not travel all the way south (see Franklin and Shepard 1996, 43).

55. The Dunhuang manuscript Or.8210/S.6050 lists nine pieces of

amber as a gift to a monastery in the tenth century; these could well have been sourced through various middlemen to the Rus merchants.

56. Noonan 1992, 243; Noonan 1994, 227; Kovalev 2002; Merkel et al. 2013 (for isotopic analysis of the metal). Noonan estimated that 125 million Samanid dirham came into northern Europe during the tenth century (2000–1, 206).

57. See “The Merchant’s Tale” and “The Horseman’s Tale.”

58. On the conversion to Judaism, see Olsson 2013; Christian 1998, 293–95. On the competing claims of Byzantines and Arabs, see Noonan 1999, 502. There have been numerous studies on this conversion, including many skeptical ones, but the consensus now is that it took place sometime after the mid-eighth century; Olsson suggests soon before 861 (519). As with the Uygur Turks’ conversion to Manichaeism (see “The Horseman’s Tale”), the new religion was adopted by the elite but not by all the population. Christian and Muslim populations remained, and some Khazars probably retained traditional beliefs.

59. Christian 1998, 284–85.

60. Shaban 1976, 148–51.

61. See Frye 2005. Ibn Fadlān’s account has formed the basis of a novel (Michael Crichton, *Eaters of the Dead*, 1976), which in turn was used for a film (*The Thirteenth Warrior,* Touchstone/Disney, 1999).

62. Franklin and Shepard 1996, 64.

63. Quoted in Franklin and Shepard 1996, 64.

64. Frye 2005.

65. Spuler 1960, 67.

66. For an example of neck and arm rings in the Walters Art Museum, see http://art.thewalters.org/detail/2826/neck-ring/ and http://art.thewalters.org/detail/28543/arm-ring-1/. See also Williams et al. 2014, 60–61.

67. Williams et al. 2014, 197, and http://art.thewalters.org/detail/20160/box-shaped-brooch/.

68. As reported by Ibn Fadlān. However, Montgomery suggests that this could have been a clothes pin (2000, 6–7 n19).

69. Graham-Campbell 2001, 118.

70. For beads and the trade in beads, see Lundström 1976; Callmer 1977. For examples, see Williams et al. 2014, 54, 65, 189.

71. Marek Jankowiak discusses the extent of the slave trade at this time (2012).

72. For Viking idols, see Simpson 1967, 182–83; for tremenn, or wooden men, see Smyser 1965, 105.

CHAPTER 8. THE OFFICIAL'S TALE

1. Translation after Chen 1992, 153.

2. This chapter is based on an actual figure known by his surviving almanac and a series of manuscripts he commissioned in his eighties in memory of his wife. Some of these were found in the Dunhuang Library Cave and are discussed in Teiser 1994, 102–21. I am indebted to Stephen Teiser for the research that informs much of this chapter.

3. Zürcher 1980, 35–50, discusses the Buddhist role in elementary education during this period, including showing writing exercises (figs. 2.1–2.10). See also the manuscript from Dunhuang now in the British Library, Or.8210/S.5491 (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 251).

4. Copies of all these texts were found at Dunhuang. See, e.g., Giles 1939, 1024–25, 1034; Zürcher 1980, 35–36.

5. On Wang Fanzhi (王梵志), see Demiéville 1982.

6. For a history of Dunhuang during this period, see Rong 1996.

7. Dunhuang Mogao Cave 156. For a reproduction, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 193; Fan 2010, 189–91.

8. Gernet 1970, 193–94, though describing a slightly later time.

9. This practice is recorded in a manuscript from Dunhuang, now in the British Library, Or.8210/S.5933.

10. Dunhuang Mogao Cave 96. See Fan 2010, 124–25.

11. Probably owing to pollutants, the dune at Dunhuang no longer rumbles, but the rumbling dunes of the Badain Jaran desert in Inner Mongolia have been recorded (Clouter and Mullender 2008, tracks 6 and 7). Cable and French 1950, 64, recorded the phenomena at Dunhuang in the 1920s.

12. Zürcher 1980, 30.

13. Deng 1962; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004.

14. Manuscript from Dunhuang now in the British Library (Or.8210/S.3326). Star charts were state documents, and the existence of this one in Dunhuang is a mystery (see Bonnet-Bidaud et al. 2009).

15. For a printed almanac from Dunhuang now in the British Library, see Or.8210/P.12. For a discussion of this, see Whitfield 1998; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 302–3 (figures).

16. For a printed almanac from Dunhuang now in the British Library, see Or.8210/P.6. See Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 302–3; Whitfield 1998, 14. For dating, see Giles 1939, 1033–34.

17. Whitfield 1998, 14.

18. For a discussion of censorship of almanacs, see Whitfield 1998, 13–17.

19. Teiser 1994, 102.

20. Teiser 1994, 117.

21. Zhao 1993; Giles 1939, 1026–27; Giles 1957, cats. 7485–7506.

22. Translation adapted from Giles 1939, 1026–27. See also Whitfield and Sims Williams 2004, 238–39.

23. For a history of this period, see Rong 1996.

24. Venerable Yong You has written on *The Diamond Sutra* in China (2010).

25. Price 1947, 56. For an online translation of *The Diamond Sutra*, see http://lapislazulitexts.com/tripitaka/T08_0235.

26. Price 1947, 58.

27. Teiser 1994, 119.

28. One of the few examples where groupings of the stars in the west (into classically designated constellations) and in China (smaller groupings into asterism) coincide. In Chinese, the grouping is called the Dipper 斗。

29. Poem by Huiyuan (344–416); translation in Waley 1960, 122.

30. Teiser 1994, 118.

31. For a discussion of the civil service in the Tang, see Herbert 1988; McMullen 1988.

32. Teiser 1994, 243.

33. Teiser 1994, 120, 243.

34. See Giles 1934 for a discussion of another manuscript, Or.8210/S.788.

35. For the charitable functions of monasteries, see Gernet 1995, 217–23.

36. Teiser 1994, 102–6.

37. For a survey of illustrations of purgatory and the ten kings, see Teiser 1994, 31–40. See also Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 330–33.

38. See “The Nun’s Tale.”

39. Teiser 1988.

40. Teiser 1994, 106.

41. Teiser 1994, 243.

CHAPTER 9. THE NUN'S TALE

1. Adapted from the translation in Price 1947, 74. Online translation at http://lapislazulitexts.com/tripitaka/T08_0235.

2. Miaofu was a nun whose name appears in several manuscripts found at Dunhuang, as discussed in Teiser 1994, 128–32. Only a very basic chronology of Miaofu's life can be inferred from these sources. This story takes what we know from other accounts of contemporary Buddhist lives to imagine the sort of life she might have lived.

3. *Foshuowuchangjing* 佛说无常经, Taisho 801, original translation from the Sanskrit by the monk Yijing (635–713).

4. The exact date of the start of Tibetan control of Dunhuang has been disputed, but the consensus is now 786 (see Hansen 2013, 280 n36, for references). The continued existence of Tibetans is shown by the ninth- and tenth-century Tibetan manuscripts found in the Dunhuang caves. Tsuguhito Takeuchi (2004b; 2012) argues that Tibetan was a lingua franca at that time. See Takata 2000 for multilingualism. See Galambos and van Schaik 2012 for a discussion of a tenth-century pilgrim passing through Dunhuang, carrying Tibetan letters of passage.

5. Details of ordination are derived from various sources, including the ninthcentury Japanese traveler in China, Ennin (Reischauer 1955b, 171–72; Reischauer 1955a, 207), contemporary images are found in the Dunhuang caves, such as Mogao 445, north wall (Fan 2010, 164–65); see also Prip-Møller 1937, 240–47, 297–99. There are also ordination certificates from Dunhuang (see Dohi 1966).

6. See the Dunhuang manuscript now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 3774.

7. See "The Courtesan's Tale."

8. Copies survive among the Dunhuang manuscripts—for an example in the British Library, see Or.8210/S.5477 (see Giles 1925–26). We do not know how they reached Dunhuang.

9. Giles 1925–26, 339.

10. Such as Taihe's sister in "The Princess's Tale."

11. Dunhuang manuscript now in the British Library, Or.8210/S.1473 (see Fraser 2005, 18–19).

12. See, e.g., the Dunhuang manuscript now in the British Library, Or.8210/S.5867 (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 210), where the rate is 10 percent.

13. Dunhuang manuscript now in the British Library, Or.8210/S.4291, dated 938 (see Giles 1940, cat. 7384).

14. From a sixth-century compilation (Tsai 1994, 20–21). The monk

was Fotudeng (ca. 231–49), a famous monk from Kucha.

15. Tsai 1994, 33–34.

16. Dunhuang manuscript now in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Pelliot chinois 3167V (quoted in Teiser 1994, 132).

17. Or.8210/S.2614 is one of many manuscripts from Dunhuang (now in the British Library) listing the local monasteries and nunneries with numbers of clergy in each. S.2614 is dated 921 and names five nunneries, the largest with 189 clergy (nuns, senior, and junior novices); see Giles 1940, 327. For Dunhuang monasteries, see Rong 1996, 266–79.

18. For rules for nuns, see Barua 1997; Yifa 2002; Chuehmen 2013.

19. Wilson 1986, 34.

20. See Tsai 1994.

21. See Gernet 1995, 142–52, for a discussion of the economics of Buddhist monasteries.

22. Gernet 1995, 58–60.

23. McKnight 1981.

24. Reischauer 1955a, 207, 217–18.

25. See Clarke 2014; van Schaik 2014.

26. Dunhuang manuscripts now in the British Library, Or.8210/S.2489 and S.2490 (translation after Giles 1957, cats. 5454 and 2178).

27. Teiser 1994, 202.

28. Gernet 1995, 176–78; Schopen 2004.

29. Gernet 1995, 82. See the Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot chinois 3410.

30. Gernet 1995, 83.

31. Rong 1996.

32. For industrial installations in monasteries, see Gernet 1995, 142–50 (for mill wheels), 150–52 (for oil presses).

33. See Teiser 1988 for a description of the Ghost Festival.

34. The manuscript from Dunhuang Or.8210/S.797 contains confirmation of the summer retreat taking place in Dunhuang (see Giles 1935a, 810).

35. For a translation of the text on a manuscript from Dunhuang (Or.8210/S.2614), see Mair 1983, 87–123.

36. After Mair 1983, 97.

37. After Mair 1983, 99.

38. As, e.g., Or.8210/S.6983. See Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 244–45.

39. Gernet 1995, 67.

40. For a discussion of money, see Wong 2004. Trombert 1995 and Trombert 2013 show differences in monetary practice in the monastic and secular worlds in Dunhuang during this period.

41. For a description of festivals and their processions, see Gernet 1995, 235–40.

CHAPTER 10. THE WIDOW'S TALE

1. From a Dunhuang manuscript now in the British Library (Or.8210/S.5666). Translation after Giles 1957, cat. 6264. See also Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 278.

2. Widow Ah-long is a resident of Dunhuang mentioned in several legal documents from the Dunhuang Library Cave (translated and discussed in Hansen 1995, 68–74), and the details of the court case over the land comes directly from these documents. We do not know, however, whether she enjoyed gambling or had arthritis.

3. *Cordyceps sinensis* is a fungus that grows on a caterpillar, after killing it and filling it with myceliumand; it is also known as "winter worm" (Yartsa gunbu in Tibetan and 冬蟲夏草 in Chinese). See contemporary *materia medica*.

4. See Wujastyk 2003, 181.

5. Reischauer 1955b, 143–49.

6. The governor's letter and the abbot's reply are on the Dunhuang manuscript Or.8210/S.1604, dated 902 (Giles 1940, 318).

7. Abductions of children by raiders from the mountains are mentioned in several documents from Dunhuang, including Or.8210/S.5394. And not only children: a contract for a field laborer includes a clause for what happens should brigands attack and carry him off (Waley 1960, 162).

8. For a laborer working from the first to the ninth month, the wages were a load of corn monthly, one suit of spring clothes, one shirt, one apron, and a pair of leather boots (Waley 1960, 161).

9. Trombert 2013.

10. For a printed almanac dated 877 and found at Dunhuang showing the animals, see Or.8210/P.6 (Giles 1939, 1033–34; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 264).

11. Van Gulik 2003, 234–35.

12. Dunhuang manuscript Pelliot chinois 2539 大樂賦, "Poetical Essay on Supreme Joy," by Bo Xingjian (775–826), translation in van Gulik 2003, 203–7, quotation from 204.

13. Translations adapted from Demiéville 1959. The text is found in the manuscript from Dunhuang, now in the British Library, Or.8210/S.4129 (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 190).

14. Waley 1960, 56. See Hansen 1995, 63–64, for a discussion of divorce, including translations of divorce bills.

15. Or.8210/S.5561 contains prayers for dysmenorrhea and mentions these remedies (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 186).

16. Schafer 1963, 184.

17. See Lee 2000.

18. For an illustrated manuscript copy of the *Avalokiteśvarasūtra* (chap. 25 of *The Lotus Sutra*) showing a couple both asking for a child and then, nine months later, the childbirth, see Or.8210/S.6983 ff .9V–10R (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 185).

19. Or.8210/S.1946 (Giles 1943, 172–73; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 42).

20. After Waley 1960, 162.

21. See "The Nun's Tale." For a sutra wrapper, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 255 (the British Museum, MAS.858).

22. Schafer 1963, 159 n37.

23. See Xinjiang 2002 for an example of a model table excavated from the Astana tombs (202–5) and for a painting from Astana of a woman sitting on a stool playing another board game, Chinese chess (208). For a description of double-sixes, see Gernet 1970, 227.

24. See Schafer 1963, 66–67, for the popularity of polo at that time. The popularity of gambling is attested by the frequent references to it—for example, that the famous official Han Yü was known "for his love of gambling" (Moore 2004, 304).

25. See Or.8210/S.3005, a Dunhuang manuscript now at the British Library.

26. This part of Ah-long's life is taken from the Dunhuang manuscripts, discussed in Hansen 1995.

27. Pelliot chinois 3257, reproduced and discussed in Hansen 1995, fig. 5. For another example, a nun signing her will, see Or.8210/S.2199 (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 209).

28. For a Buddhist depiction of hell, see illustrated manuscripts and paintings of *The Sutra of the Ten Kings*, including Or.8210/S.3961 in the British Library and 1919,0101,0.23 in the British Museum (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 331–33).

29. For examples of women's clubs, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 247. For discussion of those clubs, see Ning and Hao 1997.

30. For examples, see Or.8210/S.527 (Giles 1957, cat. 7572).

31. Or.8210/S.527, translation after Giles 1943, 156.

32. See "The Nun's Tale."

33. Trombert 1999–2000.

34. For paintings of and sponsored by women, see Schuster 1985; Russell-Smith 2005, 195.

35. Hansen 1995, 73.

CHAPTER 11. THE ARTIST'S TALE

1. Acker 1974, 234–36. On Wu Daozi, see Barnhart et al. 1997, 90–94.

2. Dong Baode 董保德 is a historical figure whose brief biography is given in the Dunhuang manuscript Or.8210/S.3929 (the British Library) and discussed in Fraser 2004, 27–28. I am indebted to Sarah Fraser and conservators at the Dunhuang Academy and the Getty Conservation Institute for the research that informs much of this chapter.

3. For a history of Dunhuang during this period, see Rong 1996. The Song dynasty came to power in China in 960.

4. Lei Yanmei's name (雷延美) appears on the colophon of several of the printed documents from Dunhuang Library Cave, including the British Library's Or.8210/P.11 (dated 949–50) and Or.8210/P.9 (dated 947). See Giles 1943, 149–50, 151–52; Rong 2004b, 62; Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat 263.

5. Double-sixes was a board game similar to backgammon. See "The Widow's Tale."

6. See Dunhuang manuscript Or.8210/P.9; Rong 2004b, 62.

7. Translation from Giles 1957, 279.

8. Recorded in a Dunhuang manuscript (Or.8210/S.2687, Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 256 and translation by Giles 1943, 150). For examples of sutra wrappers, see Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 255, and an example in the Musée Guimet (EO 1208, 1199).

9. Such title tags survive on a number of Dunhuang scrolls, such as Or.8210/S.849, S.4701, S.4704; all are illustrated at http://idp.bl.uk.

10. Or.8210/S.5973. See Giles 1943, 161.

11. On the yellow dye, huangbo 黃檗, see Gibbs and Seddon 1998; Bell et al. 2000.

12. See "The Official's Tale."

13. Ma 1995 discusses the Cao family's involvement in patronage of the caves.

14. See Fraser 2004, 28, which mentions Jiang Boqin's suggestion that Dong Baode purchased the title.

15. Rong 2004a, 17. For details, see Rong 1996, 266–79.

16. Dunhuang Mogao Cave 55 (Fan 2010, 206–9).

17. For details of some of these caves, see Fan 2010, 27–33.

18. Fraser 2004, 37–47, discusses payment of workers in cooked and uncooked food.

19. Shikede et al. 2010.

20. Gernet 1995, 151.

21. The following reconstruction is based on Fraser's research (2004,

chap. 2).

22. This and following translations are from Mair 1983, chap. 1 (31–84).

23. Mair 1983, 58.

24. For an identification of pigments used in Mogao Cave 85, see Schilling et al. 2010; Shikede et al. 2010.

25. Grzywacz et al. 2010.

26. Fraser 2004, 42–47.

27. For a pounce design, see the British Library Dunhuang manuscript IOL Tib J 1361 (Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, cat. 216).

28. See, e.g., Cave 45 (Fan 2010, 143–45).

29. See Nickel 2013 for a discussion of the possible Greek influence on Chinese life-size statuary.

30. Fraser 2004, 99, fig 2.26 (for a mold).

31. For a transcription of his memorial tablet, see Chavannes 1921, 1331–34.

32. Galambos and van Schaik 2012, 18–28, reviews the theories about the cave's use and reasons for its sealing.

33. See Fraser 2004, 72, for a list of caves patronized by the Cao family. See also Lee 2012 on Cave 61.

34. For the Caos' relationships with neighboring kingdoms, see Rong 1996; Moriyasu 2000b.

35. For Khotanese gifts to the Dunhuang Buddhist monastery, see Rong 2004a, 22–23.

36. Mogao Cave 98 shows the Khotanese ruling family. See also Rong 2003 for a discussion of Khotanese patronage of the Dunhuang caves.

37. Geng 1998; Drompp 2005, 36–38; Zhang and Rong 1998, 20–21.

38. See Russell-Smith 2005, 94–96.

39. A wall-painting fragment from the Bezeklik Caves, now at the Museum of Asian Art, Berlin, is identified as possibly representing Palm Sunday; see Geng 1998, 204. See also a fragment from the Nestorian Temple at Kocho (Härtel and Yaldiz 1982, cat. 95).

40. Geng 1998, 204.

41. Rong 1996, 15, 17, 114.

42. Scholars have disputed whether Dunhuang came under direct Uygur control at this time, but they agree that it was at least under great influence. See Russell-Smith 2005, 65–66; Moriyasu 2000b, 33–34.

43. Schafer 1963, 63.

44. Russell-Smith 2005, 181–83, 187–88; Karmay 1976; Klimburg-Salter 1982; Heller 1999.

45. Mogao Cave 96 (Fan 2010, 124–25).

46. See “The Horseman’s Tale.”

47. Fraser 2004, 37–38.

48. Fraser 2004, 41.

49. See Luo 1988 for a description of the procession.

50. See Waley 1931; Whitfield 1982–85.

51. For examples of hemp banners, see the British Library, Add.Or.5222–4, at http://idp.bl.uk. See also plate 5.

52. Three widths, or one plus two half-widths, as in Dunhuang painting 1919,0101,0.12 (the British Museum); see Whitfield 1982–85, pl. 8.

53. Barnhart et al. 1997, 87–137; Fong and Fu 1980; Soper 1951.

EPILOGUE

1. I owe thanks to Daniel Waugh for very useful comments on and suggestions for reading in this chapter. For the continuation of the Silk Road, see Millward 2007: 110. For further debate on Eurasian connections in this period, see Curtin 1984; Abu-Lughod 1989; Bentley 1998.

2. On Tangut history, see Dunnell 1996; Kychanov 1998. On the Mongol conquest, see Dunnell 2009; Kepping 2001. For Tangut art, see Piotrovsky 1993.

3. Many of the Tangut manuscripts and blockprints are digitized and accessible on http://idp.bl.uk and http://eap.bl.uk. On the early manuscript finds, see Yusupova 2008; Kychanov 2008. On the finds, such as the tombs, see Steinhardt 1993.

4. For the regimes on the borders of China up to the Mongol period, see Franke and Twitchett 1994. On China's Liao empire, see Twitchett and Tretze 1994; Shen 2006; Standen 2007. For essays on Turks and Mongols, see Amitai and Biran 2005. On Central Asian empires, see Sinor 1990; Asimov and Bosworth 1998; Di Cosmo et al. 2009; Golden 2011. On the Turks and their spread across Eurasia, see Findley 2005. For a history of the Tarim from the tenth century, see Millward 2007.

5. Davidovich 1998; Findley 2005. Some scholars have suggested that this is why the Buddhists in the neighboring kingdom of Dunhuang sealed the Library Cave (see Rong 2000, 272–75). For discussion of this and other theories, see Galambos and van Schaik 2012, 26–27.

6. Findley 2005, 51, 56–75.

7. Jackson 2003.

8. Biran 2004. Numerous books have been written on the Mongols; for an overview, see Morgan 2007; Waugh 2009; May 2013. For an introduction with essays and many illustrations, see Fitzhugh et al. 2009. See also Columbia University's online resource "The Mongols in World History" (http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/). For generally excellent historical maps of Eurasia showing the rise and fall of these empires, see Thomas Lessman's website, "Talessman's Atlas," at http://www.worldhistorymaps.info/maps.html.

9. On the Indian Ocean, see Chittick 1980; Chaudhuri 1985; Pearson 2003. On African trade, see Middleton 1992; Horton 2004; Horton and Middleton 2000; Whitehouse 2001; Beaujard 2007. On China's maritime trade, see Chaffee 2008b; Schottenhammer 2008.

10. Rossabi 1997, 14–15. One of the centers was Beshbalik (see "The Horseman's Tale"). See also Allsen 1997.

11. Phillips 1998. On the role of the Mongols, see Di Cosmo 2005. For a translation of Francesco Balducci Pegolotti's *La Pratica della Mercatura,* the handbook of a fourteenth-century Florentine merchant, see Yule and Cordier 1916, 137–73, online at http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/pegol.html.

12. McNeill 1998.

13. For religion in the Mongol empire and a discussion of the limits of its religious tolerance, see Jackson 2005.

14. Findley 2005, 56–77. See also "The Writer's Tale." For introductions to Islamic science, see Nasr 1997; Turner 1997.

15. Yule and Cordier 1916, 182, 187.

16. Skilton 1994, 183–92, 202–3.

17. See Jan 1966 and Skilton 1994, 143–45, for the decline of Buddhism in India.

18. The dating of this exodus is disputed, with dates from the early eighth to the tenth centuries; see Hinnels 2008.

19. Wink 2002; Jackson 2003.

20. Phillipson 1998, 127–39; Beaujard 2007.

21. Dawson 1998; Yule and Cordier 1916; de Rachewiltz 1971; Mackintosh-Smith 2003. For online translations of these texts, see http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/rubruck.html and http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/carpini.html.

22. For an online translation of Rabban Sauma, see http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/sauma.html. See also Rossabi 1992.

23. Thackston 1998–99. See also Allsen 2001, which cites Rashīd al-Dīn extensively.

24. Medley 1989, 97–102; Finlay 2010.

25. See Krahl et al. 2011 for trade in ceramics from the eighth to the ninth centuries. For a Chinese wreck tentatively dated to the fourteenth century, discovered east of the tip of the Malaysian peninsula, and carrying Thai and Vietnamese ceramics, see http://maritimeasia.ws/turiang/index.html. See also Xu 2008.

26. Di Cosmo 2005, 398.

27. Both rhubarb and tea at this time were used medincinally (Foust 1992, 3–17; Allsen 2001, 120, 152). Allsen refers to Rashīd al-Dīn, who describes tea at some length.

28. Allsen 2001, 155, 139. See also Buell and Anderson 2010. Allsen points out that the earliest sherbet makers were Nestorians from Samarkand.

29. Allsen 1997, 1.

30. Allsen 2001, 177–79, which also cites Rashīd al-Dīn, who identified

the paper as made from bark of the paper mulberry tree, as in China. For a discussion of the possible transmission of Chinese printing techniques into Europe, see ibid., 180–85.

31. Following the tenth-century Uygur version; see “The Artist’s Tale.”
32. Whitfield and Sims-Williams 2004, 290.
33. Allsen 2001, 211.
34. Vaughan 1958, 145. See also de Rachewiltz 1971, 80.

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